

Frederica de Laguna and Her Reunion Under Mount Saint Elias

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Anthropologist Frederica de Laguna (“Freddy”) began her anthropological career almost seventy years ago (Fig. 1). In 1930 she led an archaeological and ethnological reconnaissance of Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet in southern Alaska for the University of Pennsylvania Museum (Fig. 2). In fact, much of her research throughout the years was with the support of the Museum. Her work in Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet is considered definitive for an understanding of the archaeological record of southern Alaska (McClellan 1989). In 1949, she continued with her work among the cultures and peoples of southeastern Alaska, conducting research that combined the approaches of archaeology, history, and ethnography among the northern Tlingit communities of Yakutat, a village that lies in the shadow of Mount Saint Elias, and Angoon. In 1996 Professor de Laguna returned to Yakutat to attend a gathering given in her honor by the Tlingit people among whom she had conducted research nearly fifty years earlier (Fig. 3). Her invitation was sponsored by the Yakutat Camp of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, acting for the Yakutat tribe.

Frederica de Laguna began her academic career at Bryn Mawr College in 1938 as a lecturer; she became an assistant professor in 1940. In 1967 anthropology split from its association with sociology and de Laguna,

who had been the chair of the combined program, continued as chair of the newly founded Department of Anthropology. She taught in that department until her retirement in 1975, and from that time to the present she has been the William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor Emeritus of anthropology. Several of the current faculty in the department felt her return to Alaska should be documented, not only for de Laguna’s sake, but—because of her stature in the field of anthropology—for the disciplinary record as well. This was the genesis of the “Freddy Project.” The research project is designed to capture the particular history of this “brilliant feminine pioneer” (McClellan 1989:771) and to follow her travels through the landscapes of her anthropological past in this living archive. The reunion under Mount Saint Elias served as a starting place for this documentation.

Laura Bliss Spaan, a filmmaker with whom de Laguna had worked before, captured the events of her return, creating, with support from Wenner Gren Foundation and other sources, *Reunion Under Mount Saint Elias: The Return of Frederica de Laguna to Yakutat, Alaska* (1997). The film, combined with de Laguna’s comments and conversations with those who accompanied her and those she encountered along the way, is a rich and deeply moving oral and visual transcript of anthropological history in the making.

*“everything, if you look
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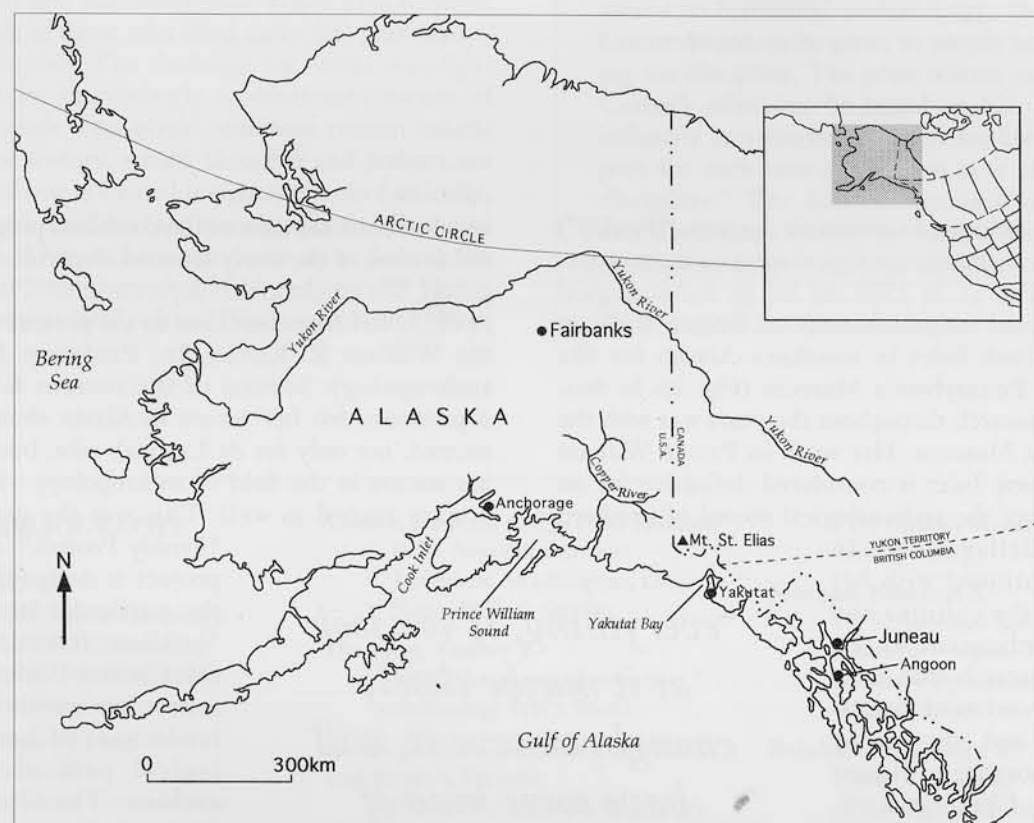


FIG. 1. FREDERICA DE LAGUNA (CENTER) IN 1935 AT THE SITE OF PALUGVIK, Prince William Sound, with Chugach Eskimo chief Makari Chimoritski (left), Dr. Kaj Birket-Smith of the National Museum of Denmark (right), and assistant Norman Reynolds (far right).

Photo by de Laguna; frame from Reunion video

FIG. 2. MAP OF ALASKA showing places mentioned in the text.

Graphic by Ardeth Abrams



THE "PIONEER"

De Laguna's professional activities and contributions to the discipline are well known and have been outlined elsewhere (McClellan 1989; and see editor's note, p. 17 above), but several of her accomplishments should be mentioned. Her field experience and research in anthropology began in 1929 as Dr. Therkel Mathiasen's first assistant in his systematic survey of the archaeology of Greenland. In 1975, she and Margaret Mead were the first women anthropologists elected to the National Academy of Sciences. All along the way de

Laguna was a trailblazer, practicing anthropology in oftentimes poorly charted and rough territories, traveling by precarious forms of transport, discovering cultures never before systematically studied (see Levine 1994 and McClellan 1989).

De Laguna was president (1939–1940) of the Philadelphia Anthropology Society, and she has served as president of the American Anthropological Association (1966–1967). In 1986 she was selected by the American Anthropological Association for the Association's Distinguished Service Award. Her response, recorded in a scribbled note to Bryn Mawr's president at



FIG. 3. FREDDY GIVING A LECTURE TO FOURTH-GRADE STUDENTS at Yakutat Public School during the reunion.

Photo by Russ Weston, 1996; frame from Reunion video



FIG. 4. FREDDY (CENTER) IN 1968 WITH COPPER RIVER ATHAPASKAN INDIANS ARTHUR JACKSON AND MARTHA JACKSON in front of their cabin.

Photo by Marie-Françoise Guédon

the time, Pat McPherson, was, "They are crazy, but I'm very pleased." President McPherson replied in a letter, "They are not at all crazy—they are in fact very much in their right minds."

And indeed, it is clear that the members of the Association were very much in their right minds to honor this last student of Franz Boas and friend and admirer of A.L. Kroeber and A. Irving Hallowell, as well as of J. Alden Mason and Linton Satterthwaite at the University of Pennsylvania Museum. One has only to consider de Laguna's accomplishments as a teacher and scholar: a body of work that includes sixteen books and over a hundred other publications, and her important collections housed at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and in Bryn

Mawr's Department of Anthropology. The film itself bears witness to perhaps the last of a breed in American anthropology.

AN "OLD-FASHIONED" ANTHROPOLOGIST

In the film Professor de Laguna refers to herself as "an old-fashioned anthropologist," one who believes that everything about a people should be studied. She remarks that her study in Yakutat was a "combination of archaeological and ethnological work," an approach which she feels "is still an ideal way of understanding a people" (Fig. 4). In her presidential address to the American Anthropological Association, de

FIG. 5A, B. STONE LAMPS. In 1930, de Laguna ventured into the field as a young graduate student with the hope of determining the cultural source of stone lamps such as this one (a) found in southern Alaska. Some scholars believed these rare lamps, with human figures in the bowl, were imported from the Orient. During the summers of 1930–1933, de Laguna conducted archaeological excavations in Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound. At the close of the 1933 season, her excavations uncovered a small stone lamp (b) with a human figure in the bowl. Found in situ within a prehistoric Eskimo Kachemac Bay Culture III house site, the excavations confirmed, in what was a major triumph for de Laguna, that lamps such as these were made by Pacific Eskimos.

(a) UPM no. NA 9251, H. 12 cm, L. 41.7 cm. Kenai Peninsula, Alaska. Collected in 1919 by W.E. Johnson. (b) UPM no. 32-8-120, H. (incl. figure) 10 cm, L. 21.2 cm. Yukon Fox Farm III, Cook Inlet, Alaska; Prehistoric Pacific Eskimo, Late Kachemac Bay Culture III, ca. AD 600–800



FIG. 6A, B. WOODPECKER MASK. In 1935 de Laguna returned to the field to search for the presence of early humans in the interior of Alaska. Though results on this topic were limited, the season did provide the first reliable data on prehistoric and historic sites in the region. De Laguna collected ethnographic objects from several different interior groups and worked with native informants to locate a broad range of information. At the village of Holikachaket, she was assisted by native informants in collecting 19 wooden masks from an abandoned cache. The masks, including this one depicting a woodpecker, were worn in a dance to honor and give thanks to the animal spirits.

UPM no. 35-22-47, L. 25.3 cm. Village of Holikachaket; Ingalik Athapaskan, ca. 1930. Drawing of mask by Paul Vinicoff, American Section volunteer, 1996



FIG. 7. FREDDY AND ELAINE ABRAHAM singing and dancing the raven and snipe song.

Photo by Russ Weston, 1996; frames from Reunion video

FIG. 8. FREDDY (RIGHT) AND HER LONG-TIME FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE, CATHARINE (“KITTY”) MCCLELLAN, taking notes from gravestones at the Yakutat village cemetery located at Anka Point. McClellan is noted for her publications on Yukon Territory (1975, 1987).

Photo by Russ Weston, 1996; frame from Reunion video



Laguna lamented “the increasing specialization and separation . . . of the different subdisciplines” that characterizes contemporary anthropology (1968:469).

Her interest in the Yakutat Bay began with observations that similar archaeological cultural traits were found in such widely separated areas as the prehistoric sites discovered at Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound and the great sites of the Gulf of Georgia and Lower Fraser River region in southern British Columbia discovered a generation earlier. She believed that these similarities represented historical contact and the exchange of objects and ideas between groups. In de Laguna’s estimation, Yakutat Bay appeared to be the most obvious stopping point for migrating groups and trading parties of Native Americans, a kind of crossroads for the exchange of cultural practices, artifacts, and ideas. She became intrigued with conducting an ethnographic study of a functioning Tlingit community among the archaeological sites of their ancestors, a study that would allow her to “trace the development of the emergence of a Tlingit cultural pattern from its early beginnings” (interview, *Reunion* out-takes 1997).

Like many American anthropologists of her time, de Laguna felt, as she says in the film, “everything, if you look at it maybe closely enough, or save it, will have some kind of meaning.” She, like many of her colleagues, felt the urge to record and so preserve, if not salvage, the disappearing lifeways of native peoples (McClellan 1989). Her insatiable holism and a vision of irrecoverable loss that were also common concerns for early American anthropology found friendly support from museums (see Hallowell 1960). And so de Laguna collected objects and artifacts that are the stuff of museum collections, along with the games, songs, dances, myths and legends, cures and medicines that made up the social and intellectual world of the Tlingit of Yakutat. This great regard for data, material and immaterial, was necessary for understanding the inner historical developments of particular cultures, as well as tracing contacts between them that could outline the boundaries and reaches of “culture areas.”

The University of Pennsylvania Museum holds considerable collections that she assembled: specimens from Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound (1931–

1933) (Fig. 5) and from the middle and lower Yukon Valley (1935) (Fig. 6); and other objects from the Tlingit (1950, 1952–1954) and the Copper River Athabascans (1954, 1958, 1960, 1968). Eighty percent of Bryn Mawr's collection of archaeological and ethnographic objects was established under her guidance, and represents a collection not only for scholarly use, but for teaching purposes as well.

HIGHLIGHTS OF REUNION UNDER MOUNT SAINT ELIAS

The film is narrated by Elaine Abraham, the daughter of the late Olaf and Susie Abraham, who at the time of de Laguna's initial study were respected elders of the village and her teachers (Fig. 7). As well as being a straightforward chronicle of de Laguna's reunion with the Tlingit of Yakutat, the film also captures her holistic expertise as she figuratively and literally meanders through present and past geographies. She identifies topographic and environmental features of both archaeological sites and 20th century villages, and discusses the ecological and historical significance of these features for the Tlingit. De Laguna moves easily from commentaries on the material conditions of life for the Tlingit to explanations of the meanings given in Tlingit myth and song to physical features of their environment.

Professor de Laguna and her travel companion, Catharine ("Kitty") McClellan, a former student who became a colleague as well as a formidable anthropologist of North America in her own right, visit the old village site where they worked together many years ago

(1952). They examine gravestones and reminisce about past fieldwork associations, places, villages, and clan houses now long gone (Fig. 8). At the grave of another close native friend and key informant, Minnie Johnson, de Laguna speaks about her desire to write Minnie's life history. Minnie's grave arouses memories of songs and stories and de Laguna's relationship with Minnie's grandchildren as "joking relatives." A complex picture of Tlingit social organization, past and present, emerges in conversations about Tlingit shamanism, life in the old village, the gender of glaciers, stories of childbirth, songs and dances, and mythological charters of clans.

Her research on Yakutat and its people is embodied in her three-volume monograph, *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit* (1972). In the film, Elaine Abraham remarks that de Laguna "collected so much information during her early fieldwork here that it filled three huge books . . . Almost everyone [in Yakutat] has a set. And almost everyone here wants her to sign them." This points up the meaning her books have for the Yakutat Tlingit: they find them credible accounts of their rich culture. Abraham testifies to the role de Laguna's work has played in contemporary constructions of Tlingit identity. She comments that many in the community are "deeply interested in figuring out what it means to be Tlingit," and they want to honor de Laguna "for her part in helping them find their answers." Professor de Laguna's work, says Abraham, represents the "greatest gift anyone can give a culture." The deeply felt respect and affection that the anthropologist, "Grandma Freddy," and the people she worked with have for each

other reverberates throughout the film, in the gifts she is given by fourth graders, in the dance and ceremony given in her honor.

Another theme heard over and over again in the film, and one found in de Laguna's own work, is a "note of sadness for the extinction or wrenching changes experienced by once flourishing native American cultures" (McClellan 1989:772). The urge to salvage an understanding of a people from the fragments of what was once a coherent, rich culture continues to be of some concern for de Laguna. However, she is not a romantic primitivist, nor does she entertain the notion of a history or culture of a people as static and unchanging. In her address given at the reunion, de Laguna remarks:

This is the most extraordinary and delightful surprise to find that the people I knew are far from vanishing. They've got a new lease on life. There's new vigor and I'm particularly happy and proud of all the new artists among the Tlingit, among the Yakutat people; a rebirth of pride among themselves.

THE FUTURE OF THE "FREDDY PROJECT"

Reunion Under Mount Saint Elias has been shown in several Alaskan venues and has met with critical acclaim in and outside of Alaska. It has received a Bronze TELLY in the documentary category, an Award

for Excellence from the National Videographer Awards, and was honored at the American Indian Film and Video Festival held in Oklahoma City (June 1997).

The filming of Professor de Laguna's return, and the film itself, represent the first phase of the project. The design for the second phase of research is still in progress. There remains a great deal of unused rough-cut film footage with which to work. Also planned is a more focused consideration of de Laguna as a senior anthropologist with a history that will further examine her "old-fashioned" anthropology from a broader perspective, as part of a history of American anthropology. For Bryn Mawr's Anthropology Department, the "Freddy Project" continues a long-standing research concern in the anthropology of Alaska that is still active today. The project also reflects the pedagogical value the department places in its curriculum on the knowledge of the history of the discipline, a tradition de Laguna herself established along with the department. **2**

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The film *Reunion Under Mount Saint Elias: The Return of Frederica de Laguna to Yakutat, Alaska* is currently in distribution for sale or rent. Write, call, fax, or e-mail:

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VHS tapes are \$19.95 each, plus \$3.00 shipping. Checks should be made out to AMIPA. A clip of the video can be seen on *Expedition's* web site at www.upenn.edu/museum.

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