

## PRESS RELEASE

### Sheldon Jackson Museum

104 College Drive, Sitka, AK 99835

Phone (907)747-8981 Fax (907)747-3004

Home page: <http://www.museums.state.ak.us>

## ‘OCTOPUS’ BAG HIGHLIGHTS CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

CAROLYN YOUNG, 747-8981

The March Artifact of the Month at the Sheldon Jackson Museum celebrates National Women’s History Month by drawing attention to two extraordinary women: one who sold an artifact and one who purchased it.

The featured artifact is a Tlingit "octopus" bag, so named because of the four long, fabric fingers that hang down from it. Inside the bag was a handwritten note that said, "Bag bought of Princess Thom of Sitka, Alaska in 1882 by Mrs. Schwatka and Admiral Benson, who was with her."

Princess Thom (Kaajint or Gajint or Emeline Baker) was a well-known Tlingit entrepreneur of the late 1800s. Thom amassed a substantial fortune through shrewd and enterprising trade. She reportedly loaded her canoe with trade goods in spring and fall and visited villages throughout Southeast Alaska. She purchased a wide range of materials on her trips and when she returned to Sitka, she sold them to local traders at considerable profit.

Princess Thom was reputed to be quite wealthy, owning real estate in Sitka and Yakutat. She was from a respected Tlingit family of the Kaagwaantaan Clan and had been raised in the traditional Tlingit manner. She had several husbands before joining the Presbyterian Church. No further information is available about the bag Princess Thom sold to Mrs. Schwatka. It is possible that Princess Thom made it, but her reputation as a business woman suggests that she obtained it during one of her trading trips and then sold it.

Ada Schwatka made several trips to Alaska with her explorer husband, Lt. Frederick Schwatka, who was famous for his travels up the Yukon River and his unsuccessful attempt to climb Mt. St. Elias in 1886. While with her husband on his northern journeys, Ada Schwatka wrote travel articles for the *New York Times*, which sponsored the Mt. St. Elias expedition. It was probably during her first trip to Alaska in 1883 that Ada Schwatka bought this fine example of a Tlingit octopus bag. Such bags have long been an important part of Tlingit regalia. This bag highlights the richness of the little-known roles of women in history. It will be on display in the Museum gallery March 1-31.

