

Linda S. Thibodeau  
Director

Division of Libraries, Archives,  
& Museums

lam.alaska.gov

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Robert C. Banghart  
Deputy Director

395 Whittier St.  
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1718  
907.465.2901

## Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### March Artifacts of the Month: Snuff Boxes Collected by Sheldon Jackson

SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum Artifacts of the Month for March are four snuff boxes collected by the Rev. Dr. Sheldon Jackson (II.Y.27, II.P.86a,b, II.P.88, and II.N.33). All four boxes were collected in the far north and used to carry tobacco. Two are listed in records as being from the Arctic Ocean region; the third is from the Holy Cross Bay, Siberia; and the fourth is from Kotzebue Sound.



The four boxes differ considerably in design. One of the snuff boxes is made of a hollow animal leg bone with a round wooden bottom. It lacks a cover and was designed with a double-line border with vertical spur lines, and incised with black ink, now faded and washed away. The second snuff box is long and rectangular, carved in one piece, and has a sliding cover. Except for a functional ridge to open and close the box, it is unembellished. The third snuff box is wooden, round,

and wrapped in baleen. It has a removable cover that is slightly cracked. The fourth box, also wooden, is oval in shape, and wrapped in bark, featuring a triangular cutout shaped pattern.

Explorers' accounts of contact with Alaska Natives possessing tobacco in the far western and southeastern areas of the territory date back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1741, Georg Wilhelm Steller landed at Kayak Island east of Prince of Wales Sound and collected from an abandoned Native home site a Chinese pipe and a pound of tobacco. Several weeks later, when his ship

stopped in the Shumagin Islands in the Aleutians, he was offered by Natives two Chinese pipes. During the exchange, Lieutenant Waxell, who was accompanying Steller, offered one of the Natives a lit pipe filled with tobacco. Although Tlingit and Haida of southeastern Alaska and the Tsimshian cultivated a tobacco-like plant prior to the mid-1700s, this, according to Robert Fortuine's *Chill and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*, was the first introduction of tobacco to Alaska Natives by Europeans. Accounts of tobacco use and/or cultivation were later reported by Captain Cook in 1778, Shelikhov in 1784, Captain Dixon in 1789, and Lieutenant Whidbey of Vancouver's 1792 expedition.<sup>i</sup>

In the late 1700s as trade with Europeans increased, the use of the tobacco-like plant native to Alaska fell into disuse and was replaced by European tobacco which was stronger, easier to obtain, and could be chewed or smoked.<sup>ii</sup> Not just for recreational use, the European tobacco was increasingly used for ceremonial purposes, became highly valued for shamanistic ceremonies, and was sometimes given to relatives or friends of the sick.

Tobacco and pipes first reached northern Alaska not via European ships but over traditional trade routes with Natives of Siberia across the Bering Strait. These Siberian Chukchi traders, according to Ernest Bruch Jr., obtained tobacco from Circassia (a region and historical country in the North Caucasus and along the northeast shore of the Black Sea), Poland or Sweden. They then traded it with northern Alaskans starting in the mid-1750s. Trade between Siberia and northern Alaska continued through the nineteenth century with the north coast of Kotzebue Sound and Port Clarence on the Seward Peninsula boasting major trading centers. From these areas, trade goods, especially tobacco, were disseminated to the north coast and into the interior along major river systems.

According to Edward William Nelson's classic, seminal work, *The Eskimo about Bering Strait*, men and women of northern Alaska historically used tobacco in different forms. Women usually chewed tobacco or took it as snuff, rarely smoking it, the preferred method for men. To prepare for chewing, tobacco was cut into shreds on small boards and once sufficiently fine, mixed with ashes from birch tree fungus obtained through trade with Athabscan Natives of the interior, and rolled into rounded pellets or quids. The addition of the ash or occasionally Cottonwood bark improved the taste and allowed the tobacco to last longer. Sometimes tobacco residue was removed from pipes and mixed to offer a stronger flavored chew. Women often then chewed the quids slightly to prepare them for their husbands and male relatives before packing them in small boxes for carrying. Men did not usually chew the quids, but held them in their cheeks and swallowed the juice.

To make snuff, tobacco leaves were dried and shredded and then pounded in a small wooden mortar with a wooden pestle until it was a powder. Occasionally, the powder was mixed with charcoal. The powder was then sifted and kept in a small box until it was taken by inhaling, one nostril at a time, through a tube, usually made of finely engraved duck or geese wing bones.

Snuff and tobacco boxes varied greatly in shape and design and often featured engravings of animals and human figures, bone, copper, iron or ivory inlays, and beads. These snuff boxes and

others, a large variety of tobacco pipes, and mortars and pestles may be viewed at the museum until March 31<sup>st</sup>. During winter hours, the museum is open from 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

Burch Jr., Ernest. *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Inupiaq Eskimo Nations*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. 2006

Fortuine, Robert. *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. 1989

Nelson, Edward William. *The Eskimo about Bering Strait*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1983. Print

Vanstone, James. *The Bruce Collection of Eskimo Material Culture from Kotzebue Sound*. Chicago: Field Museum. 1980 (Fieldiana: Anthropology, New Series, No.1, Publication 1305)

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Jacqueline Fernandez

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

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<sup>i</sup> The plant leaves were dried over a fire, ground up in a stone mortar, pressed into cakes, and among the Haida and Tlingit, was mixed with lime. The plant was then chewed as opposed to being smoked or inhaled. According to Whidbey, tobacco was the only plant cultivated by the Tlingit.

<sup>ii</sup> Russians would exchange tobacco for favors or make a gift of it for a job well done and Russian American Company regularly used tobacco as a treat or incentive for Unangan or Koniag hunters at Sitka or at posts on Kenai Peninsula.