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## INTRODUCTION

### *Living and Remembering Pandemics in the Bering Strait Region*

AMY PHILLIPS-CHAN

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Sounds of shuffling boots and rustling coats punctuated the silence inside Nome City Hall on March 12, 2020. The normally sparse room used as council chambers now had guests spilling out into the hallway and standing on chairs to catch a glimpse of City Council members assembled on either side of the mayor of Nome (figure 0.2). An open container of cookies sat untouched on a table next to a package of cleaning wipes. One person wore a face mask. Nome residents had gathered for a special emergency meeting to discuss potential cancellation of activities related to the 48th Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, due to the COVID-19 coronavirus that had just arrived in Alaska. Over the next three hours, council members listened to families, business owners, and medical staff who expressed varying levels of caution for continued operation and access to city facilities, stores, and air travel (Haecker 2020a). A cloud of intense fear hung over the room as residents envisioned mass arrival of the coronavirus with visitors flying into Nome for the Iditarod and the Lonnie O'Connor Iditarod Basketball Tournament. Council Member Meghan Sigvanna Topkok urged the audience to remember the devastating effects of the 1918

Spanish Influenza on Alaska Native families and remarked that she “was only a few generations removed from family that had died in the Spanish Flu” (City of Nome 2020a). The meeting ended with an approved motion to close public facilities frequented by visitors for the next two weeks, including Old St. Joe’s Hall, the Nome Visitor Center, and the Nome Recreation Center. The doors of the Richard Foster Building—home of the Kegoayah Kozga Public Library, Katirvik Cultural Center, and Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum (Carrie McLain Museum)—were also to close to the public.

Like other Alaska museums at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Carrie McLain Museum did not know how long we would remain closed to visitors or how exactly the pandemic was going to unfold in our rural community. The museum spent the first few months of the pandemic striving to remain a community resource in small ways, such as responding to research inquiries, accepting (and quarantining) new donations, and increasing social media posts about materials in the collection. Staff organized our collection of historical newspapers and completed a few writing projects. Willow leaves on the tundra began to display their





**FIGURE 0.2.** Nome residents crowd into City Hall on March 12, 2020, to share their concerns about the arrival of COVID-19 in Alaska. Photograph courtesy of John Handeland.

brilliant hues of red and gold, and the pandemic appeared here to stay. By the fall of 2020, museums across the country were pivoting to online experiences, and many were launching initiatives to acquire objects and stories related to the pandemic (Chambers 2021; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum 2021; Errico 2020).

Nome residents had been expressing their thoughts on the pandemic through social media,

but there was very little COVID-19 related signage, artwork, or other ephemera for our museum to collect. What our community did have was a glaring absence of firsthand accounts from the 1918 Spanish Influenza, particularly stories from Indigenous community members (Smith 2020b). So, with our past before us, in September 2020 the Carrie McLain Museum decided to focus our efforts on launching an oral history project that documented local narra-





tives and promoted collaborative history of the pandemic in the Bering Strait region.

As 2020 stumbled forward into 2021, the country experienced an intense period of racial and social unrest; an unprecedented era of isolation; the development, distribution, and ultimate politicization of vaccines; and a gradual, cautious reentry into a post-COVID reality. In Nome, the museum's oral history project expanded to welcome addi-

tional community narrators, artists, and poets who came onboard to share stories, create artwork, and contribute written material for a project that came to be known as *Stronger Together: Bering Strait Communities Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

This introductory chapter to *Stronger Together* situates the COVID-19 pandemic within the scope of historical pandemics in the Bering Strait region with emphasis on the 1918 influenza and a compar-



MAP 1. The COVID-19 pandemic spread across 23,000 square miles of the Bering Strait and impacted community members connected to all twenty Alaska villages in the region shown here. Map by Dale C. Slaughter.

ative model of community impact and response. An overview of museological responses to the pandemic is offered with consideration of historical documentation practices in Nome that gave rise to the current oral history and artwork initiative. Community member stories afford insight into personal experiences and challenges encountered during the pandemic, from cancellation of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race and loss of tourism, to the celebrated arrival of air freight and vaccines. Artist narratives speak to the work they created for the project as well as shifts in the art world during the

past three years. The text prioritizes first-person narratives and strives to offer a nuanced look into the lived experiences of Bering Strait community members in the era of COVID-19.

## BERING STRAIT COMMUNITIES

Tumultuous waves carry marine mammals, fish, and people through the ice-laden channel of the Bering Strait between Eastern Chukotka and Northwest Alaska (map 1). In Alaska, the Bering Strait region lies just below the Arctic Circle and



features sloping mountains with rocky outcrops, windswept tundra speckled with berries, and lush riverine valleys that feed into the sea. The area encompasses approximately 23,000 square miles on the Seward Peninsula and the shores of Norton Sound as well as Little Diomed Island, King Island, and St. Lawrence Island. Many of the region's twenty communities are strategically located along the coast or next to river systems with access to marine mammals, fish, berries, and plants. Sixteen communities are permanently inhabited, while four communities are used as fish camps or for other subsistence activities. Over 9,000 people currently live in the region, of which approximately 7,000 are Alaska Native people (McDowell Group 2020:6). Indigenous people of Alaska have made this region home for 4,000 to 6,000 years, and three distinct cultural and linguistic groups live here today: Inupiat, who reside on the Seward Peninsula as well as Little Diomed; Central Yup'ik, who live in villages primarily south of Unalakleet; and St. Lawrence Island Yupik, who make their homes in Gambell and Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island.

Subsistence activities structure the lives of many families in the Bering Strait region (Sutton and Steinacher 2012:10–11). Melanie Bahnke, president, Kawerak, Inc. explains that subsistence means more than hunting or gathering but, rather, maintaining a relationship with the environment: “Our Tribes are stewards of our oceans, and we are not merely users of resources, but intimately connected and part of the ecosystem in the Bering Sea” (Bahnke 2021). Winter brings opportunity to catch king crab through the ice and trap furbearers like fox and wolf. Breakup of the sea ice in spring takes boats out after seals, walrus, beluga and bowhead whales, and excursions along the coast to hunt seabirds and gather eggs. Summer entices fam-

ilies to fish camps along the coast and long days netting and drying salmon; picking salmonberries, blueberries, and crowberries; and gathering beach greens and sour dock. First frost in autumn sweetens tundra cranberries and signals the time to hunt moose, harvest reindeer, and jig for tomcod through lagoon and harbor ice. Local foods hunted and gathered throughout the year are carefully dried, frozen, or canned to be brought out and shared with family members and friends on special occasions. Bering Strait Native artists carefully save, gather, or purchase the walrus ivory, whalebone, baleen, and animal skins from harvested animals to use in a wide range of artwork (Kawerak, Inc. 2021; McDowell Group 2020).

At the heart of the Bering Strait region lies Nome, or Sitjasuaq in Inupiaq, located on the southern coast of the Seward Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous peoples first lived in this area over 300 years ago, where they netted fish, scraped sealskins, and ate their dinner from earthenware vessels next to the Snake River (Bockstoe 1979; Eldridge 2014). The town of Nome originated during the 1898 gold rush that brought Euro-Americans, Alaska Natives, and Chukchi villagers together on the remote six-mile stretch of smooth coastline laden with golden sand (Cole 1984; Phillips-Chan 2019). The town soon developed into a bustling center of trade and commerce, as well as a supply depot for travelers venturing farther north or inland across the Seward Peninsula (Bockstoe 2018:60–66). Today, Nome serves as a transportation hub for the Bering Strait region. Alaska Airlines and Bering Air shuttle passengers year-round while Alaska Marine Lines and Alaska Logistics barge mountains of freight to the Port of Nome in the summer and fall. About 3,200 long-term residents call Nome home, with around half of the community identifying as Alaska Native and the



other half as Non-Native. Altogether, Nome encompasses a diverse and rich range of blended families, languages, and cultures that speak to the complex social history of the community and region.

## **PANDEMICS ACROSS THE BERING STRAIT**

Smallpox, influenza, measles, diphtheria, and tuberculosis have swept through the Bering Strait over the past 120 years and left families and communities devastated (Haycox 2020; Jarvis et al. 1900; G. Salisbury and L. Salisbury 2005; Wolfe 1982). Nineteenth-century exploration and Western settlement in the region brought diseases for which Alaska Native communities held little natural immunity. In 1838–1839, Russian-American activity at St. Michael set off a smallpox epidemic that stretched to the Yukon River and along the southern coast of Norton Sound. The disease decimated several villages, including Taciq and Atrivik at St. Michael (Pratt et al. 2013:42–43; Zagoskin 1967:95–100). Spread of respiratory infections across the Seward Peninsula in the late 1800s was further exacerbated by a decline of walrus and caribou herds upon which Native peoples relied as a primary source of nutrition (Burch 2012:70–74; Krupnik 2020; Pratt et al. 2013:43–44). Over the following generations, Native communities demonstrated an incredible resilience to social and ecological adversities and an enduring capacity to pivot to alternative resources.

## **THE GREAT SICKNESS OF 1900**

One of the first major epidemics to strike Nome occurred in the summer of 1900, when an influenza virus arrived aboard steamships to the burgeoning

city of 20,000 residents (Wolfe 1982:95–98). Local officials at the time considered the viral disease to be smallpox, which carries initial symptoms similar to influenza, including headache, fatigue, and nausea. Vessels found to have the disease onboard were swiftly put under quarantine and forced to retire to Egg Island near St. Michael. In Nome, Captain D. H. Jarvis ordered “a hospital to be erected, and immediately isolated all persons known to be afflicted with the disease, and all suspects were carefully watched. Within a few weeks all danger of contagion had been destroyed, and with the recovery of the last of the patients in the hospital the building and all of its furnishings were burned” (Harrison 1905:59–60).

Outside Nome, Siberian Yupik traders from Chukotka made their annual summer visit to St. Lawrence Island and Wales and inadvertently carried a measles virus along with their reindeer skins, tea, and other goods. As measles and influenza raced across the Seward Peninsula over the fall, the respiratory diseases merged into concurrent infections, causing severe symptoms and high mortality rates among Alaska Native peoples. One victim was the mother of Emma Willoya, who was traveling down the coast from North Alaska in the fall of 1900 with her mother and father, Captain William Hegarty, on his whaling ship the *Mary D. Hume*. Willoya’s mother contracted measles around Port Clarence and soon passed away. Left on her own, Emma spent the remainder of her childhood at the orphanage in Brevig Mission (Bockstoce 1986:327; Willoya 1979:64–65). The influenza-measles epidemic became known as the “Great Sickness” due to its spread throughout Western Alaska from Point Hope to Atka. In Nome, several Alaska Native people are known to have perished during the first month of the epidemic and in Gambell, seventy-



four people, approximately 22 percent of the population, succumbed to the disease by the summer of 1901 (Wolfe 1982:105–107).<sup>2</sup>

### 1925 DIPHTHERIA EPIDEMIC AND THE SERUM RUN

Arguably the most well-known epidemic to strike Nome occurred during the winter of 1925, when diphtheria broke out and set off a breathtaking relay of dogs and men to bring serum to the isolated town. In 1925, Nome's population had

declined to fewer than 1,500 and townsfolk relied on a single physician, Dr. Curtis Welch, and a handful of nurses at Maynard-Columbus Hospital for health care (Coppock 2006). On January 21, Dr. Welch diagnosed the first case of diphtheria in six-year-old Richard Stanley, an Alaska Native boy, who passed away the next day.<sup>3</sup> With only expired serum at the doctor's disposal, the Nome Board of Health announced a quarantine over the town, and a coordinated effort began to bring fresh antitoxin from Anchorage to Nenana via railroad and from Nenana to Nome via dogsled.

**FIGURE 0.3.** Museum visitors capture a photograph of “Fritz,” one of the lead dogs of Leonhard Seppala during the 1925 Serum Run. March 2022. Photograph by Amy Phillips-Chan.

The resulting Serum Run, or “Great Race of Mercy,” involved a relay of twenty mushers and almost 150 sled dogs who crossed 647 miles of snow and ice to bring vials of antitoxin bundled in canvas and furs from Nenana to Nome in five and a half days (B. Thomas and P. Thomas 2015:66–73). Administration of the fresh serum curbed the epidemic and prompted Dr. Welch to remark that “the situation is more favorable at this time than I expected it to be.”<sup>4</sup> By the time the disease had run its course, dozens had been diagnosed with diphtheria and five people had perished, a number that without treatment might have reached into the hundreds.<sup>5</sup> Mushers and the lead sled dogs Balto and Togo quickly captured the media’s attention and became heroes memorialized in films, cartoons, and books (Phillips-Chan 2019:107–108; Ricker 1928).<sup>6</sup>

The Serum Run continues to elicit fascination from sled dog enthusiasts all over the country. The Carrie McLain Museum fields research requests about the Serum Run every year, and one of the most popular displays at the museum is the stuffed Siberian husky “Fritz,” lead dog of Serum Run musher Leonhard Seppala (figure 0.3).

On February 22, 2020, a team of six mushers accompanied by snowmachines, a veterinarian, and a medical doctor set out on a commemorative Serum Run Expedition from Nenana to Nome. The team encountered severe cold, overflow, and a sled dog–snowmachine collision before mushing into Nome on March 12, 2020, the same day as the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Alaska (Haecker 2020a; Johnson 2020). KNOM reporter Emily Hofstaedter (this volume, p. 70) remarked, “I’m following this reenactment of the Serum Run, which is tracing a serious illness in Nome’s history, right as we’re starting to hear rumbles around the world of coronavirus . . . I’m thinking of those other

reporters whose accounts of the diphtheria outbreak I was reading and I thought, ‘I’m one of those reporters now.’”

## SPANISH INFLUENZA, 1918–1919

The most devastating epidemic to ever hit the Seward Peninsula occurred during the winter of 1918–1919, when the Spanish Influenza took the lives of over 800 Alaska Native and Non-Native adults and children (appendix A; table 0.1). Steamer ships carrying passengers and mail to Nome in the summer of 1918 brought news of an unfolding worldwide epidemic caused by the Spanish Influenza. Nome health officer Dr. Daniel S. Neuman decided to take precautionary measures against the virus. In early fall he began to advise all mail on the *S.S. Victoria*, one of the most frequented passenger ships to Nome, to be fumigated before distribution (figure 0.4).<sup>7</sup> As news from the outside became more alarming, Dr. Neuman sent an urgent telegram to health officials in Seattle on October 9, 1918, with an appeal to carefully inspect all passengers and crew of the *Victoria* before embarking on that year’s final voyage to Nome. Neuman warned, “Only two physicians here and they are insufficient for epidemic. Soldiers, Eskimo, and white population must be protected in this isolated section.”<sup>8</sup> Three passengers showing signs of influenza were refused passage. The *Victoria* arrived in the Nome roadstead on October 20, after a slight delay due to returning to Port Townsend to let off a sick crewman who had doubtless contracted the virus. Dr. Neuman met the incoming passengers at the lighterage dock in Nome and personally escorted the travelers to Holy Cross Hospital in a solemn procession that made “some of the more timid observers” start to run “when the line of passengers approached on their





journey.”<sup>9</sup> *Victoria* passengers were placed under strict quarantine at the hospital while around town, public gatherings were banned, the Dream Theater locked its doors, and schools closed for two weeks. The military base at Fort Davis, located a few miles east of Nome, was also placed under quarantine and social visits to town prohibited. No signs of influenza developed among the *Victoria* passengers over the next few days, and on October 25 residents were allowed to return to their homes.<sup>10</sup>

On October 28, 1918, close to 700 passengers crowded aboard the *Victoria* for the fourteen-day return trip from Nome to Seattle. The departure

of Dr. W. d’Arcy Chace, assistant commissioner of health, left only Dr. Neuman to oversee the 450 Non-Native residents and 250 Alaska Natives in Nome and Dr. Henry Burson at Fort Davis to oversee the military staff (Harrison 1905:367–368).<sup>11</sup> The following day, October 29, Dr. Burson made the first diagnosis of influenza in William Bailey, an enlisted man at Fort Davis. Bailey tended to the heating plant at the hospital when *Victoria* passengers were under quarantine, which is where he is thought to have contracted the disease.<sup>12</sup> Nome officials raced to reinstate a city-wide quarantine, suspend church services, and prohibit pub-

FIGURE 0.4. Hundreds of passengers line the deck of the SS *Victoria* upon arrival in the Nome roadstead on June 25, 1918. Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, McLain-833.

MAP 2. The Spanish Influenza raced along the coast of the Seward Peninsula during the winter of 1918–1919. The disease left mortalities in the villages identified here and led to the desertion of many Alaska Native villages. Map by Dale C. Slaughter.



lic gatherings. Despite efforts to curb the spread, by November 4 active cases of influenza in Nome and Fort Davis had soared to 200.<sup>13</sup> Tending to the infected soon caught up with Dr. Neuman, who fell ill, leaving only Dr. Burson at Fort Davis to oversee the growing epidemic.

Over the next few weeks, outbreaks of influenza flared up across the Seward Peninsula, unknow-

ingly carried by individuals who were in Nome during late October 1918. On November 12, *The Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget* reported that influenza had been confirmed at Candle, Council, Cape Nome, Sinrock, and Cape Woolley (map 2). Eleven-year-old Jerry “Ahsuk” Kaloke was living with his parents and six other families at Cape Woolley when an Alaska Native man named Atunguk from Teller



stopped at Woolley on his way back from Nome. Kaloke (1979:10) recalls people soon began to get headaches, and then “the whole village was nearly wiped out in five days except for my father.”<sup>14</sup>

As November 1918 dragged mercilessly on, influenza broke out at Solomon, Bluff, St. Michael, Mary’s Igloo, settlements along the Penny and Cripple Rivers, Chinik, and Golovin. By the end of the month, twenty-six white residents in Nome and five at Fort Davis had perished.<sup>15</sup> Even more devastating, influenza had swept through Alaska Native families living close to Nome and taken 175 men, women, and children. The number was so great that Father Bellarmine LaFortune reported that the Pioneer Mining Company was digging a trench 200 feet long for a mass burial of Alaska Natives who had succumbed to the disease.<sup>16</sup>

Other communities were more fortunate than Nome and escaped the epidemic. At Shishmaref, a messenger from Deering arrived in late November with news of superintendent of education Walter C. Shield’s death and warned influenza was sweeping across the peninsula and wiping out Native villages including nearby Wales (figure 0.5) (Jones 1919:1). Shishmaref officials and teacher John P. Jones immediately instituted a strict quarantine, discontinued school, halted trapping, and established a guarded outpost eight miles down the coast (Jones 1919:2). Nome resident Sherri Anderson (chapter 36 in this volume, p. 161) remembers her grandmother Katherine Olanna recounting the tale of her grandfather in Shishmaref, who was “one of those people that would have to go stand at a post.” The *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget* on March 24, 1919, detailed one encounter at such an outpost: “Nick Christianson of York is said to have attempted to reach Shishmaref sometime after the influenza had abated in the Wales section but was stopped by a native with a gun a short dis-



FIGURE 0.5. Nome residents Walter and Julia Shields (left) and Wales herder Louis Tungwenuk (right) pose with reindeer horns in February 1910. Walter Shields was the first recorded Nome resident to perish in the 1918 influenza. He left behind his wife, Julia, and seven-year-old twins, Sarah and Tom. Louis Tungwenuk survived the pandemic and carried news to Nome on April 15, 1919, that influenza was finally gone from Wales. Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, Accession 2017.5.

tance from Shishmaref.” Christianson continued to proceed, but the guard fired a shot in warning. When Christianson brought his dog team to a standstill, he saw that the guard had his gun fixed upon him. He stopped and retraced his steps and later stated “he was convinced that the Eskimo would have shot him dead if he had not halted.”

At Council, alarming reports from Nome prompted local physician Dr. William Ramsey to post flyers across town on November 8 announcing a strict quarantine over Council and its 150 res-



idents (Ramsey 1919:1). Over the next few months, all social calls were prohibited, residents were advised to wear gauze face masks, and none were allowed to enter or leave the town except by permit from the Health Committee. Similar actions were taken at White Mountain by quarantine officer and teacher J. V. Geary, who visited families every morning to check on their health. Dr. Ramsey stated, “As a result of the most rigid quarantine neither White Mountain or Council ever became the vast field of infection, sickness, and death, as did Nome” (Ramsey 1919:2).

Below-freezing temps, blistering winds, and scant snowfall in December 1918 made sled travel difficult as relief parties from Nome fanned out across the Seward Peninsula to check on neighboring communities. On December 2, news first reached Nome of a dire situation at Teller, where influenza had already taken 60 Alaska Natives and 1 Non-Native from a community of fewer than 80 residents.<sup>17</sup> Sam “Paukingnauk” Ailak was eleven years old when a mail carrier arrived with his dog team at Teller on November 3 and inadvertently brought the influenza virus. Ailak (1979:3) recollected, “I remember one of the last church services we had before the flu. It was the first part of November 1918 and we were crowded in the school room for service. This was one of the last Sundays the Eskimos were together and had communion. By the next Sunday many of them had gone to a more beautiful service to be with their Lord.” Additional assistance for Teller was hurriedly sought, and volunteers quickly set off from Nome with medical supplies and clothing. Volunteer Thomas Jensen left directly from Teller to Wales, where “the gravest fears” were entertained for the large Alaska Native settlement from which there had as yet been no report.<sup>18</sup>

The first relief party to Wales arrived on December 4, 1918, and found the community in the grimmest of circumstances. An Alaska Native mail carrier and his two companions had unknowingly carried the influenza virus into Wales, an Inupiaq community of 312 people, on November 9, where it swept through the north and south villages, striking entire families down, and causing orphaned children to freeze to death due to their inability to secure fuel (Nagozruk 1919:2).<sup>19</sup> A total of 170 people perished in Wales, 55 percent of the whole community (Nagozruk 1919:5–14). One of those carried away by the epidemic was Nowadluk/Nowadlook (Nora) Ootenna, who was living with her husband, George Ootenna, and their nine-year-old daughter, Isabel Tayokenna, in the north village (figure 0.6) (Nagozruk 1919:13). News of her death was one of the few Alaska Native obituaries that ran in the *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*: “Reports from Wales say Norah [*sic*], the Eskimo beauty, whose face is well known to the majority of Nomeites through the medium of the portrait studies made of her some years ago by Lomen Brothers, was a victim of the influenza epidemic.”<sup>20</sup>

Of the 142 survivors at Wales, almost 100 were children left without parents.<sup>21</sup> Willie Senungetuk was nine years old and living with his family in the north village at Wales when influenza struck. Sixty years later, Senungetuk (1979:12–13) still remembered the trauma of that winter:

The people were told a bad flu would come and by interpreter were made to understand how it would be best to take care if it came. Then the mail carrier came, and half or more of the people of Wales were dead. The territory governors sent help by dog team, food and labor. The people who were left were taken

to the schoolhouse until everyone was well. Many children were taken in by their closest relatives. Some children survived staying with the dead until they were located. All of us who were left will never forget that year. It's tough to go through [life] without parents, especially when you are small.

Influenza symptoms first manifested in Wales on November 15, but without a telegraph system the snowbound community was unable to send word of their plight (Nagozruk 1919:2). Community members waited over two weeks for someone, anyone, to come while sickness ravaged their community. Arthur “Angazuq” Nagozruk, US government teacher at Wales in 1918, implored, “If we could communicate through wire or wireless to Teller and Nome this terrible epidemic would have been avoided and a strict quarantine would have been done like other villages who had heard about it before any spread toward them” (Nagozruk 1919:3).

By the end of February 1919, the influenza virus had receded from the Seward Peninsula and left behind a region in mourning. The death toll was bleak: sixty-nine Non-Natives had perished, including those who had become infected during *Victoria's* last sailing of 1918 from Nome to Seattle (table 0.1).<sup>22</sup> The number of Alaska Native deaths was even more staggering: over 720 men, women, and children had died from eighteen known communities.<sup>23</sup> Emma Willoya, who had survived the Great Sickness of 1900, was herding reindeer with her husband in the fall of 1918 when she observed that “villages came to be very small, even the small village close to where we had moved [in the area of Penny River], there had been thirteen families, but there were only three women left . . . They died just like feathers falling down, that's all” (Willoya 1979:66).



FIGURE 0.6. Nowadluk/Nowadlook (Nora) Ootenna and her husband, George Ootenna, were successful Inupiaq reindeer herders from Wales. Nowadluk was a favorite subject of Nome photographers, and her passing in the 1918 influenza was one of the few Alaska Native obituaries that ran in the *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*. Photograph by Wilfred McDaniel, Nome, c. 1905. Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, MCD-197.

Departure of the sea ice in the spring of 1919 brought a difficult choice for those who had survived. Non-Native families weighed the decision to remain in Nome or book passage to places with less-painful memories. There was no question of remaining for Julia Shields, whose husband, Walter C. Shields, had been one of the first victims of influenza in Nome.<sup>24</sup> Julia carefully packed her husband's handwritten journals, photograph albums, and collection of walrus ivory carvings; took the hands of her seven-year-old twins, Tom and Sarah; and swiftly boarded a southbound ship.<sup>25</sup> Fifty years after leaving Nome, memories of 1918 remained so raw that Julia would not speak of her time on the Seward Peninsula, even to her grandchildren (Shields 2017). A similar decision to leave was made by Elizabeth "Lizzie" Mielke, who lost her husband, prominent businessman Frank J. Mielke, during the height of influenza in November 1918.<sup>26</sup> Lizzie and her fifteen-year-old daughter, Clara Mielke, moved to Seattle in the summer of 1919 (figure 0.7). Despite the heartbreak of 1918, Clara stayed in touch with friends in Nome and upon her passing gifted the Mielke family's extensive collection of walrus ivory carvings, grass baskets, and photographs to the Carrie McLain Museum.<sup>27</sup>

For the almost 250 Alaska Native children left without parents, a choice to decide on what would happen next was almost nonexistent.<sup>28</sup> Over the course of the epidemic, the US Bureau of Education provided care for orphans across the Seward Peninsula. Children from small villages or isolated areas were taken to the mission at Teller or brought to the orphanage established at Holy Cross Hospital in Nome.<sup>29</sup> By January 1919, ninety orphans were living in Nome, and the Bureau of Education turned their care over to the Lavina Wallace Young Native

Mission and the Catholic Church. Children deemed of "Catholic persuasion" were placed with the Catholic mission at Pilgrim Hot Springs near Mary's Igloo (figure 0.8).<sup>30</sup> The remaining children were transferred to a Methodist-run boardinghouse and school on Second Avenue in Nome. In Wales, the Alaska Native community resisted government efforts to remove the 100 orphans from their village. Acting superintendent of education Dyfed Evans reported, "The natives were much averse to the orphaned children being transported to other places and he [Evans] was repeatedly importuned to 'tell the government not to take our children away.' The natives insisted that the orphans belonged to their village and that they would be cared for by survivors of the epidemic."<sup>31</sup> As a result, many orphaned children at Wales stayed in the community with their adopted families and remained connected to their language and culture.

One hundred years after the influenza epidemic, Nome community members gathered in the fall of 2018 for dedication of the Sitnasuanmiut Qunjuwit memorial, which honors the 175 Sitnasuanmiut people who perished during the Spanish Influenza as well as those who died in surrounding communities (Mason 2018) (figure 0.9). Present at the dedication ceremony was eighty-nine-year-old Abunaat Atqaq Esther Bourdon (1929–2021), whose parents, Kimasuk (Josephine) and Kauwailak (Michael) Koweluk, were living with their two oldest children in the north village at Wales when influenza struck in 1918 (Nagozruk 1919:12).<sup>32</sup> In between songs performed by the Inupiaq language choir, Gloria Karmun of Nome Eskimo Community commented, "These people laid to rest here are ancestors, family members to many of us . . . and, in their day, laid their foundation for the City of Nome" (qtd. in Hofstaedter 2018).





FIGURE 0.7. Clara Mielke (back row far left) lines up her Nome Sunday school class for a photograph in June 1919. Clara's father, Frank Mielke, was a prominent Nome businessman who perished during the Spanish Influenza. Clara and her mother, Lizzie, relocated to Seattle soon after this photograph was taken. Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, 96.7.19.



FIGURE 0.8. Inupiat children and adults pose for a photograph with ptarmigan caught in wood snares at Mary's Igloo around 1920. The 1918 influenza devastated Inupiat families and left behind almost 250 orphaned children. Nome authorities relocated many children to the Catholic mission at Pilgrim Hot Springs near Mary's Igloo. Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, NMP-4-18.

#### COVID-19 PANDEMIC, 2020–2021

Dedication of the Sitnasuanmiut Qunjuwit memorial had taken place less than two years before the Nome community faced the threat of another widespread pandemic. During the special emergency meeting on March 12, 2020, Nome residents expressed concern that the coronavirus would be carried into Nome through arriving travelers, similar to the Spanish Influenza of 1918 (City



FIGURE 0.9. Nome community members gather for the dedication of the Sitnasuanmiut Qunjuwit on October 1, 2018. The memorial features a twelve-foot cross and viewing platform on the West Beach hillside. It serves to remember and reclaim Indigenous autonomy over a nearby mass grave where 175 Sitnasuanmiut Inupiat lie who perished in the 1918 Spanish Influenza. Photograph courtesy of James Mason.

of Nome 2020a). Nome youth pastor James Ventress (this volume, p. 88) recalled, “We were interpreting reports from down south through the lens of the historical context of 1918. New York was a major city, and they were falling behind in keeping up with the virus. We are a tiny town with not so many resources. That fear was what was occupying our minds a lot.” Soon after that initial meeting, the City of Nome passed a series of emergency orders that sought to limit air travel and reduce public gatherings of people in indoor spaces (appendix B) (City of Nome 2020b; Haecker 2020b, 2020c). Dr. Mark Peterson (this volume, p. 58) commented that the “really intense travel bans into Nome” were a response to those who “had listened to stories and received wisdom from their ancestors who had survived the 1918 flu epidemic. The history of infectious diseases wiping out areas of Alaska really put fear into people.”

Following cancellation of 2020 Iditarod activities in Nome, tensions ran high among the iced-in community. Nome resident Derek McLarty (this volume, p. 82) opined, “The City of Nome’s decision to close things down was definitely made in a late fashion. Halfway through the week of events before Iditarod, the city was like ‘Well, I guess we’re going to shut everything down, even though everybody’s already here in Nome.’ They tried to have their cake and eat it too.” Artist Karen Olanna (this volume, p. 127) had a different opinion: “I had lived long enough in rural Alaska to know many stories of the flu epidemic of 1918 . . . I thought the future would bring mass deaths, so I supported the Nome City Council’s decision to shut down most Iditarod activities. Even though I had worked hard all winter preparing for art activities for Iditarod week.”

Confirmation on April 14, 2020, of the first positive case of COVID-19 in Nome prompted many

local organizations to lock their doors and send employees home (Haecker 2020e). Bering Tea & Coffee owner Kristine McRae (this volume, p. 66) remarked, “Closing took some stress off of us, in terms of the virus danger, but it also added stress because we had ordered a lot of supplies for Iditarod . . . So we took a big hit financially after having made that initial investment and then not selling anything for six weeks.” A flurry of public service announcements followed the first case of COVID with health and safety recommendations that suggested setting up virtual playdates for children and sharing snowmachine or four-wheeler rides with only your immediate family.<sup>33</sup> City of Nome manager Glenn Steckman (this volume, p. 78) explained, “It was really about trying to balance the concerns of the Alaska Natives, who remember through generational stories the big sickness of 1918, and those in our community who didn’t quite buy into the complete shutdown of the city.”

Threat of a potential COVID-19 outbreak in the Bering Strait region seemed to fade over the summer of 2020, when just a handful of cases were identified, and residents took to the tundra to enjoy their usual activities of picking berries and gathering greens, drying fish, and spending time with family at camp. Nome resident Brandon Ahmasuk (this volume, p. 165) remarked, “I was still able to do all my hunting and fishing during the pandemic. Subsistence activities fall right in with social distancing: getting out and getting away from everybody. We could be up at camp for weeks and not see anybody. I think this was a subsistence user’s time to shine.”

Then on October 8, 2020, the community of Gambell experienced the region’s first outbreak, with over thirty positive cases of COVID-19. Village public safety officers delivered food and supplies to



affected households in Gambell, as well as hauled water for those without indoor plumbing. Isolation from friends and family was particularly difficult for the community of 700, as noted by Gambell resident Charlotte Apatiki. “It’s especially hard when you have close-knit families that are so used to spending so much time together” (Smith 2020c). Just over a month later, Nome experienced its first outbreak, when a positive case of COVID-19 at a local bar led to a surge of fifty active cases in just a few weeks (Smith 2020d, 2020f). Nome City Council quickly responded to the outbreak with closure of bars and restaurants, local schools returned to distance learning, and public holiday celebrations were canceled, among them, the Nome Volunteer Fire Department’s Fireman’s Carnival and the City of Nome’s Christmas Extravaganza (Smith 2020e).

Most schools in the Bering Strait region returned to in-person classes in January 2021. In March, mushers of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race did not come to Nome for the first time in race history, and residents hosted an alternative Winterfest with outdoors races and contests (Mason 2021). Nome resident Julie Farley (this volume, p. 177) enthused, “I am just amazed at how people came through with their little activities and festivities here in Nome . . . There were snowmachine races and dog races in between the storms . . . It gave you hope for the future.” COVID-19 cases ebbed and flowed across the region during the summer, with outbreaks in Stebbins and St. Michael that sent the communities into lockdown mode in August (Lerner 2021a). Then on October 13, 2021, more than a year and a half into the pandemic, the Bering Strait region experienced its first COVID-19–related death (Lerner 2021c). A month later, a pediatric version of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine arrived in Nome, and doses were quickly distributed to villages in the



FIGURE 0.10. Gambell Health Aide Marina Koonooka embraces her daughter Lena, the first five-year-old in Gambell to receive a Pfizer vaccination for COVID-19. November 2021. Photograph courtesy of Norton Sound Hospital.

Bering Strait (NSHC 2021a) (figure 0.10). As the year 2021 drew to a close, approximately 75 percent of the Bering Strait region had received a vaccination, and active cases outside of Nome were declining (NSHC 2021b) (figure 0.11). At the start of 2022, the Bering Strait region had experienced three deaths due to COVID-19, and communities were experiencing a resurgence in cases related to the Omicron variant (Loewi 2022; NSHC 2022).



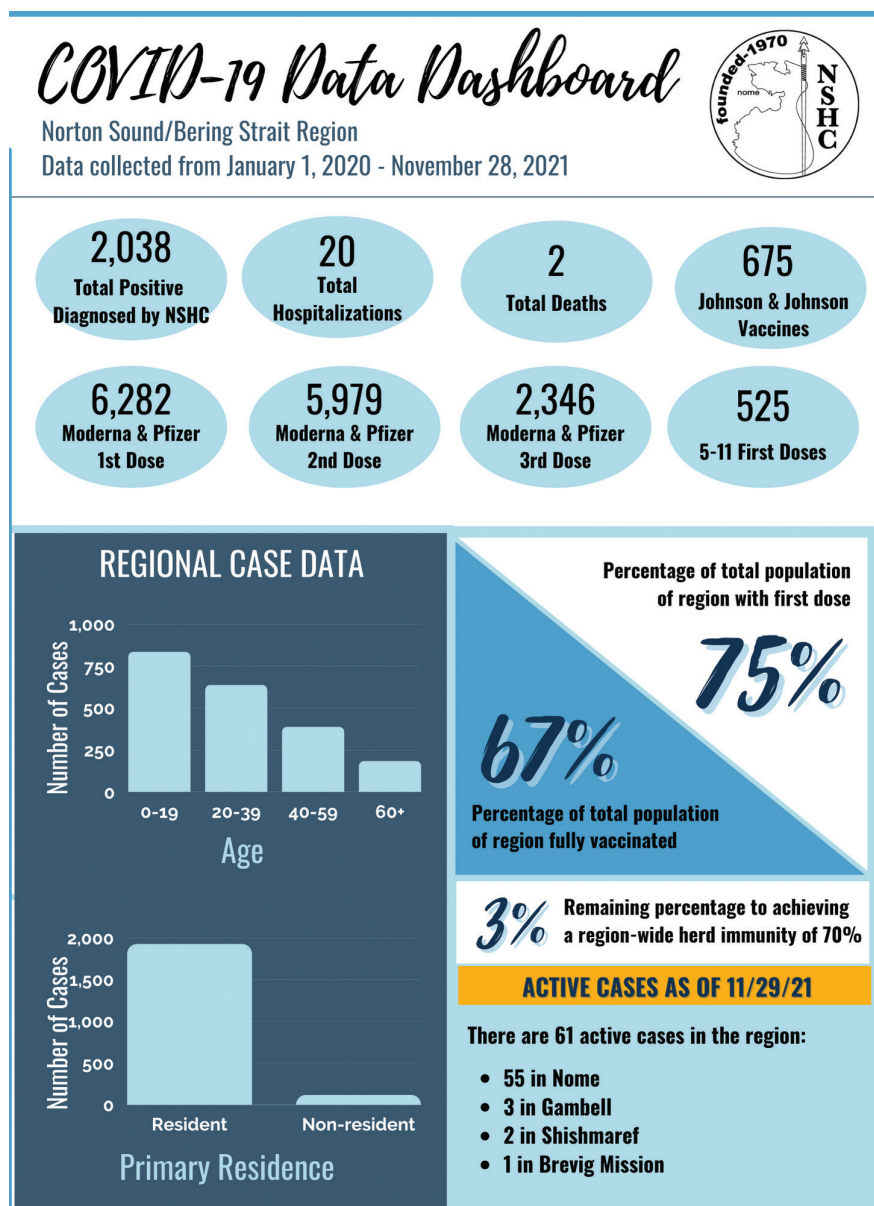


FIGURE 0.11. Norton Sound Health Corporation kept residents in the Bering Strait region apprised of active COVID-19 case counts through a weekly COVID-19 Data Dashboard. The week for November 28, 2021, is shown here. Data Dashboard courtesy of Norton Sound Hospital.

## MITIGATING PANDEMICS IN THE BERING STRAIT REGION

Precautionary measures taken by local officials to reduce the spread of the Spanish Influenza and COVID-19 in the Bering Strait region carry remarkable similarities despite the 100-year time difference. Infectious disease experts in 1918 recognized that the influenza virus could be transmitted through contaminated air. The *Victoria* was thoroughly fumigated in October 1918 before passengers boarded the ship for their return trip to Seattle.<sup>34</sup> Similar steps were taken in 2020 by Alaska Airlines, which expanded COVID-19 safety measures onboard their aircraft, including equipping planes with hospital-grade air filtration systems, limiting the number of guests, and using electrostatic sprayers to disinfect surfaces (Alaska Airlines 2020). Twenty-first-century travelers also became accustomed to mandatory use of face masks while inside terminals and airplanes (figure 0.12).

The City of Nome instituted additional precautions against COVID-19 beginning in March 2020, with the introduction of essential air travel permits followed by a quarantine period for all travelers flying into Nome via the Anchorage airport (figure 0.13) (Haecker 2020d). In May 2020, a white testing tent for COVID-19 sprung up outside the Nome Airport and soon expanded to include two heated weather ports for passengers waiting to get tested (Haecker 2020f). Nome implemented air travel requirements to protect both local residents and regional community members who had to fly through town when returning from outside the region. Not everyone agreed with the travel precautions. City manager Glenn Steckman remarked (this volume, p. 78), “People are feeling like they’re trapped on the island, and if they get off the island,



FIGURE 0.12. TSA agent Wayne Arrington helps to ensure COVID-19 safety protocols are followed inside the Alaska Airlines terminal in Nome. June 2020. Photograph by John Handeland.

then they have a choice of going through a seven- or a fourteen-day quarantine.” Norton Sound Hospital offered free “Quarantine Lodging” for Alaska Native travelers stopping in Nome on their way to other villages in the region and stressed that the hospital honored “the community’s leadership travel restrictions” (NSHC 2020a).

Medical personnel in 1918 also realized that the influenza virus could be carried by infected indi-



FIGURE 0.13. Recent arrivals at the Nome Airport stand in line to get tested for COVID-19. From March to December 2020, the City of Nome required incoming travelers from Anchorage to quarantine and complete a travel activity form. June 2020. Photograph by John Handeland.

viduals traveling into surrounding villages. Council was one of the first communities to be infected with influenza and quickly formed a Health Committee to control all movements in and out of town.<sup>35</sup> On December 16, 1918, Nome city health officer Dr. Daniel S. Neuman reiterated that the quarantine over Nome would not be lifted for some time, mail was not allowed to leave or enter the city, all unnecessary travel was discouraged, and no one was allowed to leave town without permission from the local health authorities.<sup>36</sup>

City of Nome officials made comparable efforts to control the spread of disease within town in 1918 and 2020. In October 1918, Nome officials closed the public schools, shuttered the Dream Theater, prohibited church services, and banned public gatherings.<sup>37</sup> Similar action was taken in March



2020, when trips to grocery stores became limited, city facilities closed to the public, and Nome Public Schools transitioned to distance learning (Mason 2020).<sup>38</sup> Nome high school senior Ava Earthman (this volume, p. 54) recalls what it was like to take classes remotely: “My physics class started at eight in the morning, so I would call in and go back to sleep immediately. It was difficult, especially because I didn’t have internet at home . . . everybody else could see each other, and that was sad for me.”

In April 2020, the City of Nome began promoting the use of face masks to curb the spread of COVID-19.<sup>39</sup> Local youth embraced face masks as both a business venture and science experiment, including ten-year-old Neva Horton, who spent her summer sewing and selling cloth masks and eleventh grader Bode Leeper, who tested the effectiveness of various face coverings to block airborne droplets (M. Thomas 2020, 2021). Grocery stores in Nome started requiring patrons to wear face masks in July 2020, and directional arrows and social distancing decals soon popped up in grocery store aisles (Smith 2020a). On October 2, 2021, the City of Nome issued its first face mask mandate for all indoor public spaces following a rise of COVID-19 cases in town (Lerner 2021b).

The use of face masks in Nome in 1918 began to appear almost immediately after the arrival of influenza. Face mask users were applauded by local newspaper staff, who claimed their efforts were “aiding themselves and the community in stamping out the influenza germs.”<sup>40</sup> Face masks made from gauze or cheesecloth were considered essential safety items and were carried by relief parties alongside medicine and clothing to surrounding Alaska Native communities.<sup>41</sup> The resumption of mail service across the Seward Peninsula in February 1919 included a long list of restrictions for mail

carriers who had to exchange their parcels twenty feet apart, isolate their dogs, and, when in close contact, “wear over nose and mouth, masks made of eight folds of cheesecloth—always same side out.”<sup>42</sup>

Organizational health efforts to educate the general public about the spread of infectious diseases followed similar promotional strategies in 1918 and 2020. In the fight against the Spanish Influenza, the US Army Corps encouraged individuals to “Remember the three C’s—a clean mouth, clean skin, and clean clothes” (figure 0.14).<sup>43</sup> For COVID-19, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services also relied on a triple-C acronym to motivate individuals to avoid “closed spaces, crowded places, and close contact situations” (Alaska Department of Health and Social Services 2022). Likewise, repetition of the “3 Ws”—“wear a mask, wash your hands, and watch your space”—appeared on everything from street signs to T-shirts in 2020 and 2021 (figure 0.15).

Educational messages on how to remain healthy during the Spanish Influenza were frequently published in the *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*. However, messaging was strictly geared to English-speaking residents of the region. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Norton Sound Hospital worked with Alaska Native language speakers on Indigenous-language messaging. Vera Metcalf (this volume, p. 158), originally from Savoonga, remarked, “I worked a lot with Norton Sound Hospital doing public service announcements for them in Yupik. I did the best I could to figure out new terminology and explain all the precautions we have to do, especially during our spring season, when boats are getting ready to go out.” The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium also worked with Alaska Native language experts to produce a series of videos and culturally relevant infographics about COVID-19 specifically for tribal



## HOW TO STRENGTHEN OUR PERSONAL DEFENSE AGAINST SPANISH INFLUENZA

1. Avoid needless crowding—influenza is a crowd disease.
2. Smother your coughs and sneezes—others do not want the germs which you would throw away.
3. Your nose, not your mouth was made to breathe through—get the habit.
4. Remember the three C's—a clean mouth, clean skin, and clean clothes.
5. Try to keep cool when you walk and warm when you ride and sleep.
6. Open the window—always at home at night; at the office when practicable.
7. Food will win the war if you give it a chance—help by choosing and chewing your food well.
8. Your fate may be in your own hands—wash your hands before eating.
10. Don't use a napkin, towel spoon, fork, glass or cup which has been used by another person and not washed.
11. Avoid tight clothes, tight shoes, tight gloves—seek to make nature your ally not your prisoner.
12. When the air is pure breathe all of it you can—breathe deeply”.

CHAS. RICHARDS

Brigadier General, Medical Corps  
Acting Surgeon General  
U. S. Army.

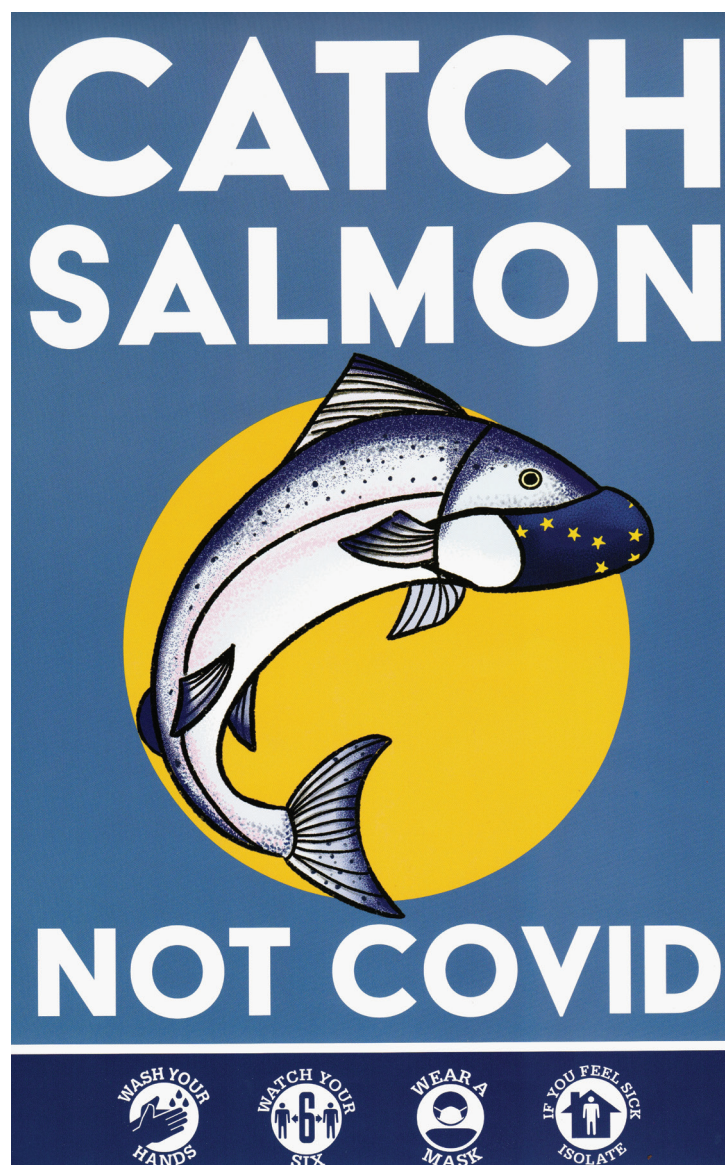
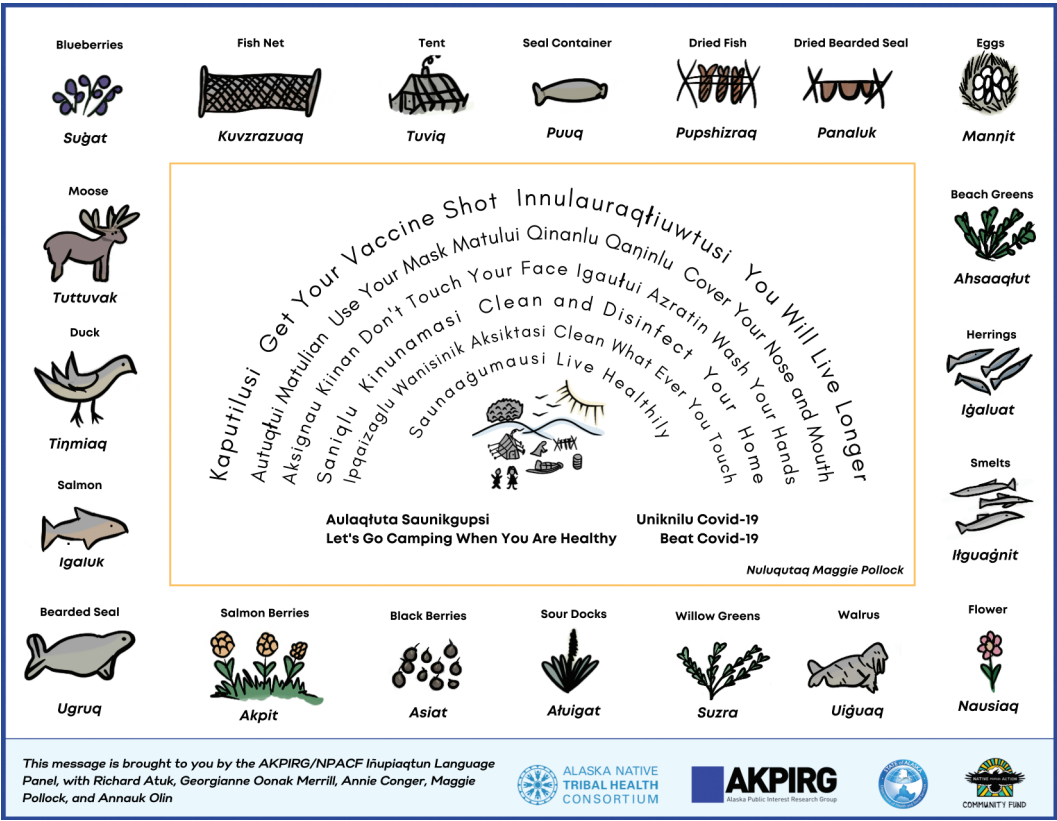


FIGURE 0.14. (left) The Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget ran local and national recommendations to safeguard residents against the Spanish Influenza. This precautionary list by acting surgeon general of the US army Charles Richards appeared in the *Nugget* on November 4, 1918, and urges, among other advice, “Smother your coughs and sneezes—others do not want the germs which you would throw away.”

FIGURE 0.15. (above) A promotional flyer distributed in 2021 by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services encourages individuals to practice the “3 Ws” of safety and “Catch Salmon Not COVID.” Collection of the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum.



FIGURE 0.16. The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium organized a series of Alaska Native Language Panels who convened virtually to create culturally relevant messages about COVID-19 in eight languages. This Inupiaqtun message about COVID-19 prevention and wellness was created by the AKPIRG/NPACF Inupiaqtun Language Panel with Richard Atuk, Georgianne Oonak Merrill, Annie Conger, Maggie Pollock, and Annauk Olin. Courtesy of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.



communities (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium 2021) (figure 0.16).

Despite parallels that can be drawn between safety measures enacted during the Spanish Influenza and COVID-19 pandemics, the diseases resulted in very different outcomes for the Bering Strait region. Over 800 deaths occurred within three months of the Spanish Influenza, while the COVID-19 pandemic lingered in the region for over two years and led to 3 reported deaths at the end of 2021. Perhaps the most significant change between the two epidemics has been improvements in communication with the outside world. Due to its remote location, Nome residents relied

on often-outdated reports in the newspaper and word of mouth from arriving ship passengers to glean information about the Spanish Influenza.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, online news sources in 2020 provided residents with almost minute-to-minute coverage of COVID-19 beginning with its outbreak in Wuhan, China, to its spread across international borders and into Alaska. Online meters and data dashboards posted by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Anchorage Daily News, and Norton Sound Health Corporation (NSHC) further allowed Nome residents to track the spread of COVID-19 and make informed decisions about participation in public activities (see figure 0.11).

Communication within the Bering Strait region has also made dramatic strides since the Spanish Influenza. If news of the influenza could have been speedily transferred from Nome to surrounding villages, the death toll could have been much lower, particularly at Solomon, Teller, and Wales. During the COVID-19 pandemic, regional communication efforts included, among others, COVID-19 Tribal Leadership calls hosted by NSHC and a weekly Public Information Coordination Call led by the Department of Health and Human Services. Dr. Mark Peterson (this volume, p. 58) affirmed, “We formed our own incident command team that includes administrators, physicians, and nursing staff, and we met every morning for months. We bonded by leaning on the support of each other.” Likewise, the City of Nome activated its Emergency Operation Center (EOC) in April 2020 and over the next two years held regular meetings that brought staff together from organizations across town to share information and work on specific activities related to the COVID-19 emergency plan.<sup>45</sup> The coordinated calls and meetings allowed communities to share information with one another, provide and request support, and actively collaborate to safeguard the region against the virus.

The availability of medical assistance for rural villages in the Bering Strait has increased exponentially over the past few generations. Many communities—including Wales, Golovin, and Shishmaref—did not have a resident physician in 1918. Instead, community members often relied on the basic medical knowledge and supplies of a local schoolteacher or government nurse. When Duncan McLean returned to Nome in mid-November 1918, he reported that influenza was raging at Cape Woolley and that it was likely that the four families resid-

ing there would perish. This terrible news prompted newspaper staff to implore, “It is too bad the government has not got more nurses and hospitals for the care of the natives and the fearful mortality would not be so destructive as it has been during this epidemic although the cry for years has been raised for this much needed branch of the public service and no response to the appeal has been made.”<sup>46</sup> Even Nome, the largest settlement in the region, had only two doctors, and that number could easily drop to zero as seen in the fall of 1918, when Dr. Chace left for Seattle and Dr. Neuman fell ill.<sup>47</sup>

Transporting medical supplies from Nome to regional villages by boat, horse team, or dogsled posed a logistical challenge in the early twentieth century. During a severe winter storm in January 1919, it took eleven days for a relief party to travel the sixty-five miles from Teller to Wales by dog team.<sup>48</sup> Automobiles in Nome were rare during the early 1900s, as they were prone to get bogged down in the muddy roads and soggy tundra. However, a vehicle owned by William Webb was put to good use on November 22, 1918, when Mrs. Charles Larson rushed to Solomon in the automobile and from there caught a ride on a dogsled to Bluff, where Mrs. Finn Rosvold and her child were very sick with influenza.<sup>49</sup> On return to Nome, the automobile was loaded up with the mail from Solomon and picked up six Alaska Native peoples at Safety Sound.

Today, every village in the Bering Strait region has a local clinic staffed with trained health professionals and medical supplies (e.g., Lean 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, free telemedicine and distribution of supplies from Nome to surrounding villages ensured communities received ample quantities of test kits, face masks, vaccinations, and other critical resources (NSHC 2020b,



2021c). In Nome, Dr. Mark Peterson (this volume, p. 59) agreed, “We have been able to continue medical care in the villages through telemedicine . . . There is a benefit to having people receive medical appointments remotely because it limits the spread of viruses and germs . . . It’s amazing how much can be done by Zoom or by teleconference or telephone. Thank goodness we have all these key capabilities that we didn’t have many years back.”

### **ACTIVATING MUSEUMS DURING A PANDEMIC**

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted museums across the country to close to the public. Exhibit surfaces, interactives, and confined viewing areas all seemed to pose a significant threat in transmitting the coronavirus. On March 16, 2020, Alaska governor Mike Dunleavy, in coordination with the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), issued a mandate that closed state-operated libraries, archives, and museums to the public for an initial two weeks (Office of Governor Mike Dunleavy 2020a). Alaska libraries and museums did not receive official approval to reopen until two months later, on May 22, 2020, as part of Phase Three of the Reopen Alaska Responsibly Plan (Office of Governor Mike Dunleavy 2020b). While museums grappled with how to shift to remote visitor engagement, “Museum from Home” initiatives sprung up across the country. An online search for #MuseumFrom-Home takes one to collections, virtual tours, and educational activities designed for families, teachers, and individuals to explore from the comfort and safety of home.

Arrival of COVID-19 in the United States led museums to make creative pivots to online delivery of educational programs, exhibitions, and work-

shops. A proliferation of oral history projects and collecting initiatives sprung up as organizations raced to preserve the items, memories, and experiences of the pandemic (see Chambers 2021; Errico 2020; New York Public Library 2020). A unique challenge arose as museums like ours in Nome began to amass stories and objects while facilities remained closed to the public. Some organizations quickly launched online exhibits to share new materials, whereas others began to develop physical exhibits to coincide with reopening of their institution (see Arrajj 2021; Cooper Hewitt 2021). Enthusiastic public response to these efforts demonstrated that twenty-first-century museums are strategically positioned to serve as places of meaning making and connection during public health emergencies.

Today’s modern museum facilities, trained staff, collecting policies, and online tools offer critical infrastructure to actively participate in the collection, preservation, and sharing of history as events unfold. Active community participation in capturing and co-creating historical narratives can also generate positive social impact during intense periods of anxiety and instability. An invitation in April 2020 from the National Museum of American History (NMAH) to share pandemic-themed objects resulted in hundreds of donations. Benjamin Filene, associate director for curatorial affairs at the NMAH, remarked, “I think our constituents sense that they have been living through a historic moment and they are searching for ways to process what they have experienced” (Filene 2021). For *Stronger Together*, artist Ryder Erickson (this volume, p. 124), from Unalakleet, shared, “I am grateful that *Quality Time* is a part of this initiative because if there is anything good that can come out of these times, I am happy to be a part of it.” For artist Elaine

Kingeekuk (this volume, p. 137), of Savoonga, *Stronger Together* provided an opportunity to express her thoughts on the pandemic through symbolic imagery, “I wanted to use the crab design [on the mask] because due to COVID-19, everybody in this whole world, for the first time in a long time, was holding on together like a crab. Scientists were trying to get a vaccine, and religious people were praying for each other. We were all listening to the news and holding on together.”

### THE ELUSIVE HISTORY OF THE 1918 SPANISH INFLUENZA

In 1918, the Territory of Alaska had around 58,000 residents and three main museums that struggled to find permanent places to store and display their materials.<sup>50</sup> Nome received its first museum in 1967 with the use of centennial funds from the State of Alaska. The museum’s initial focus on mementos from the heady gold rush days contributed to an absence of materials from later disheartening events including the Spanish Influenza (Phillips-Chan 2020:26–27).

In addition to the absence of a Nome museum in 1918, the height of the influenza occurred in the middle of a severe winter. Residents would have sought warmth indoors rather than venture out into below-freezing temperatures to try to take photographs around town. Likewise, prevailing sentiment at that time would not have looked favorably on community members snapping macabre photographs of the sick or dead. There was also uncertainty on how the virus could be transmitted, mail and infected households were fumigated, and it is conceivable that everyday items were looked upon with suspicion. Finally, the influenza was an incredibly emotional and devastating event on the Seward

Peninsula. I imagine that community members had neither the heart nor strength to think about preserving items for posterity, capturing images, or penning reflective thoughts during those few months that must have stretched on like an eternity.

One of the few objects in the Nome collection from 1918 is a reindeer collar in which Inupiaq herder Samuel Nuipok carefully carved his name and the date “February 8, 1918” into the wood (figures 0.17, 0.18). Nuipok managed to survive the epidemic that winter and ten years later made news for shooting a six-foot-long gray wolf that had been killing reindeer along the Sinrock River.<sup>51</sup> Another museum item from 1918 includes a pair of diminutive leather gloves given to eighteen-month-old Shirley Humber by her father, mail carrier Robert Hart Humber, from Candle (Harrison 1905:277–278) (figure 0.19). Shirley received the gloves to wear on a voyage “Outside” to meet her grandparents in the summer of 1918, a fortuitous trip that took the family far from Nome while influenza swept across the tundra.

Among the few photographs taken around Nome in 1918 are a handful of somber images that show flags fluttering over the newly dug graves of influenza victims at Fort Davis (figure 0.20). The near absence of a visual record of the Spanish Influenza in Nome is in stark contrast to the flood of pandemic-themed images and posts that populated the social media pages of residents and the *Nome Nugget* newspaper in 2020 and 2021. Oral history accounts from 1918, particularly those from Alaska Native peoples, are even scarcer and most were recorded decades after the flu. One poignant oral history was shared by Inupiaq Elder Lela Kiana Oman (Ahyakee) (1915–2018), who recounted the death of two families at Cape Nome for the Nome Communities of Memory Project in 1996.<sup>52</sup>





FIGURE 0.17. Reindeer collar and harness used by Inupiaq herder Samuel Nuipok in 1918. Nuipok survived the epidemic and eventually moved to Nome with his wife and five children. Wood, canvas, sealskin, metal. Length 114 cm (45 in.). CMMM 2007.10.1327.

FIGURE 0.18. A red metal tag stamped with the image of a deer appears above the inscription "Sam Nuipok, C.D. H." on the collar shown in figure 0.17.

FIGURE 0.19. A pair of framed leather gloves worn by eighteen-month-old Shirley Humber on a summer trip in 1918 to the "Outside" that potentially saved her life. Length 20.3 cm (8 in.). CMMM 2021.16.1.





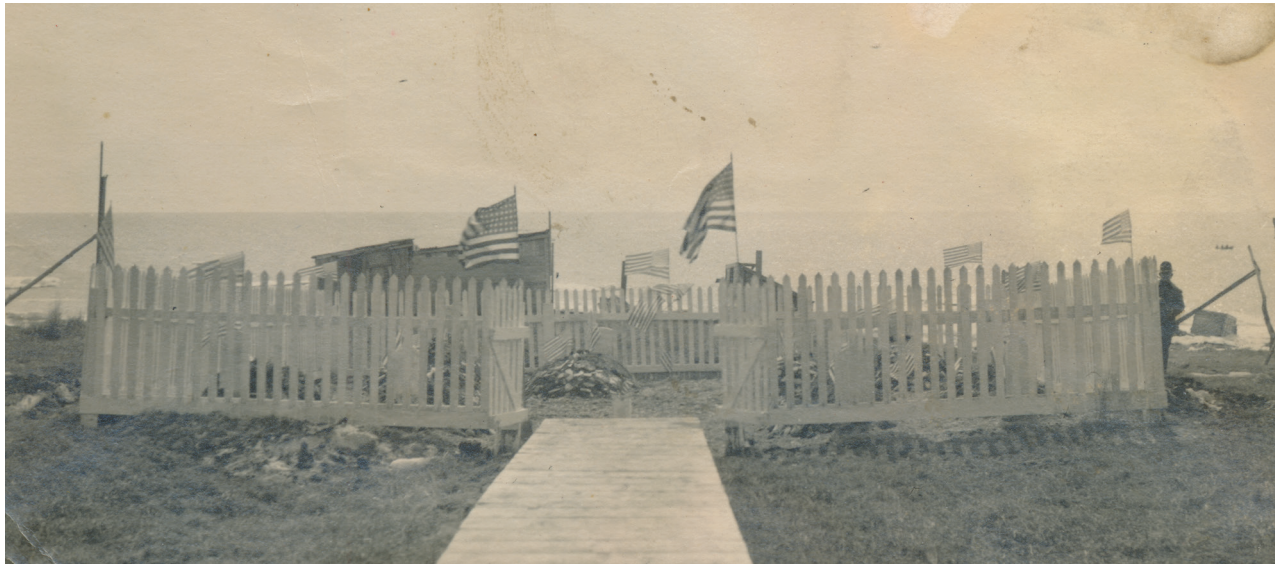


FIGURE 0.20. A boardwalk leads to the fenced-in graveyard at Fort Davis with the graves of five soldiers from the 1918 influenza: George Hadley, Oscar Hendricksen, Morris Pascoff, Tacitus Maheras, and Andy Thompson. University of Alaska Anchorage, Consortium Library, Archives & Special Collections, UAA-HMC-1086-56.

The 1919 Annual Report to the Bureau of Education by Arthur Nagozruk (Nagozruk 1919), US government teacher at Wales, arguably offers the most information on Alaska Natives during the epidemic, with ten pages of names, genders, and ages of those who lived and died in the north and south villages at Wales.

By far, the most detailed information about the Spanish Influenza in the Bering Strait region can be found in the brittle, yellowed pages of the *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*. *Nugget* reporters at the time recorded closures of local facilities, relief efforts, the names of those who became ill, and those who perished. And while newspaper accounts include all sixty-nine names of the Non-Natives who died, fewer than ten Alaska Native names were printed out of over 700 Alaska Native peoples who perished. This disparity of recorded information about Alaska Native peoples speaks to colonial perceptions at the

time, as well as to differences in languages and cultures, and an overall shortage of communication with Indigenous peoples in the region.

Over 100 years later, the *Nome Nugget* made a commitment to researching and reporting news of COVID-19 with dedicated space on each front page for the pandemic. Unlike 1918, today's newspaper featured first-person voices and perspectives from diverse cultural backgrounds. Anne Marie Ozenna was one of the first residents of Nome to share her experience of COVID-19 with the newspaper: "It's like you have the flu but its heavy on your chest . . . I went to the hospital for a couple days because I got anxiety from it . . . Family members gave me stinkweed juice," a traditional Inupiaq cold remedy.<sup>53</sup> When the Carrie McLain Museum considered what role it could play during COVID-19, we looked to the blank pages of our past and then to documentation of the present by the *Nome Nugget*. The news-

paper was effectively publishing the broad strokes about COVID-19, so our museum decided to pursue a series of oral histories that would focus on diversity and inclusivity to help offer an equitable conversation about the pandemic in our region.

### **STRONGER TOGETHER: BERING STRAIT COMMUNITIES RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Threat of the COVID-19 pandemic closed the Carrie McLain Museum to the public on March 13, 2020. Departure of staff soon followed, and the museum had to evaluate its core strengths to determine how we could continue to have a positive community impact during a growing period of disconnection. Although we were not positioned for remote delivery of programs and services, we were fortunate to hold longitudinal relationships with local community members. We also had funds in our operating budget that could be shifted to meet emerging needs. This flexibility allowed us to draw on existing relationships to launch “Documenting COVID-19 in Nome, Alaska: An Oral History Project” in September 2020. A month later, our museum began a complementary “COVID-19 Artist Initiative,” which invited creative responses to the pandemic through visual works of art. A second series of oral histories was held in March–April 2021, and that fall we worked with poets to contribute written pieces to the project. Like the pandemic, the collective project *Stronger Together* surged forward and slowed down over three years, while the museum and our partners went through a series of transitions in our home and work lives. Through it all, a commitment to co-creation of knowledge about COVID-19 kept the project centered on chronicling an inclusive and insightful narrative for generations to come.

### **COVID-19 ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

The Carrie McLain Museum began planning our COVID-19 oral history project during a singular sun-dappled summer for Nome in 2020. The project placed collaborative history as our primary aim and drew inspiration from oral history initiatives being undertaken at other museums, among them the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and the Ketchikan Museum. News reporter RB Smith joined the museum early on as an oral historian in 2020, and local historian Carol Gales came onboard to record oral histories in 2021 (figure 0.21). The museum initially announced the COVID-19 oral history project through social media, the *Nome Nugget*, local radio announcements, and a printed flyer that staff posted on announcement boards around town. Similar to previous experience, a general call for participation was not very effective in garnering community interest in the project. The museum subsequently drafted a working list of participants that represented a diversity of ages, genders, cultural backgrounds, and occupations. Direct invitations to participate in 2020 and 2021 received a more positive response, and oral history interviews were held remotely and in person with thirty-six community members. Audio and film recordings from the interviews were transcribed, shared with participants, edited for this project, and placed in the museum archives.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted issues of access, equity, and belonging that prompted cultural institutions across the country to take a hard look at whose voices were preserved in the past and whose stories should be included in the present narrative. Nome-Beltz High School teacher Mike Hoyt (this volume, p. 173) emphasized the importance of including diverse voices: “As someone that teaches





FIGURE 0.21.  
Oral historian  
Carol Gales inter-  
views Nome resi-  
dents Howard and  
Julie Farley inside  
the Carrie McLain  
Museum. April 15,  
2021. Photograph by  
Amy Phillips-Chan.

history, and especially Alaska history, I've placed a big emphasis on epidemics in the past. This is definitely going to be in the history books. So then we started asking questions: 'How do we tell that story? Who gets to tell that story? . . .'" For the oral history project in Nome, participants spoke from their unique positions as business owners, fishermen, tribal and city leaders, medical professionals, students, teachers, and community service providers. Open-ended questions invited participants to share personal experiences of the pandemic on their own terms. Some of the questions focused on challenges and coping mechanisms: What has been the toughest part of the pandemic for you? What has given

you comfort and hope during this past year? Other questions spoke to the physical impact of COVID-19: Have you or someone you know had COVID-19? What was that experience like for you? Questions also invited participants to think about the future: If the pandemic ended tomorrow, what is the first thing you would do? What would you like Nome residents to remember about the COVID-19 pandemic 100 years from now?

One of the biggest challenges faced by Nome residents was the closure of schools and the transition to stay-at-home parents and teachers while attempting remote office work. Tiffany Martinson (this volume, p. 52) recalled, "We were all working at

home and my kids were home with me. That was a nightmare! At first, we were all set up at our kitchen table so I could monitor them while I was working. But it got to the point where I found myself doing things for them that they should be doing on their own. I would just have to put my foot down and say, ‘I’m not your babysitter. Just pretend I’m not here!’” Melissa Ford (this volume, p. 167) stated the number of take-home worksheets was so daunting that they switched to homeschooling for which they “were able to create classes . . . The boys decided they were interested in gold mining . . . My daughter picked up a paintbrush and became quite the artist.” Teachers also struggled with additional precautions when classes resumed to in-person learning. Mike Hoyt (this volume, p. 173) explained, “You make a mental note of whatever the students touch to wipe it down—tables, chairs, pencils. We have five minutes between periods and having to wipe everything down, while trying to make sure you have enough printed material and all of these other things going on, it was a very exhausting teaching year.”

Social isolation during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic also took its toll on residents in the geographically insular town of Nome. Elder Kitty Scott (this volume, p. 74) remarked, “Spontaneous visiting of friends was the first to go, and that’s quite popular in smaller isolated locations. Visiting has come to a screeching dead halt, and I miss it.” Carol Seppilu (this volume, p. 62) agreed: “I stayed away from family and friends because my parents are both elderly and I didn’t want to risk bringing the virus to them. My life before the pandemic was pretty quiet, but it was really lonely not being able to go visit my parents whenever I wanted to.” Community members also felt the absence of community gatherings for Alaska Native dancing, arts and crafts fairs, and holiday events. Emily Hof-

staedter (this volume, p. 71) reminisced, “One of the things that I missed so much is the Western Alaska potluck culture, a last-minute call-up of a bunch of people who throw together food. It’s a really deep part of culture here.”

Despite struggles caused by the pandemic, Nome residents turned to the surrounding tundra and sea for healing and renewal. Long summer days spent fishing, berry picking, and hiking provided plenty of fresh air and boosted personal wellness. “This summer, I spent a lot of time out on the Teller Road, berry picking, or looking for berries. We were fishing, picnicking, and going to Teller. Every weekend. It was good. We realized how much we missed our Eskimo dancing and our Eskimo foods,” said Anne Marie Ozenna (this volume, p. 169). Community members also enjoyed crafting, baking, and taking up new hobbies during periods of solitude. “I craft, so I occupy a lot of my time making masks for other people and sewing and knitting for family. That’s how I’ve been occupying my time since COVID hit,” said Josie Bourdon (this volume, p. 72). Teenager Ava Earthman (this volume, p. 55) agreed: “I also had a lot of quarantine time to read books that I hadn’t read before. I had so much time that I made myself curtains. I attempted to learn how to cook. It was great.”

Nome residents shared that they found a renewed sense of purpose for the work that they do. Reporter for KNOM Emily Hofstaedter (this volume, p. 70) remarked, “By the time Iditarod comes, you’re already feeling burned out as a reporter up here. Then COVID happened, and it just happened and happened . . . But I think people did appreciate having us running those news stories and those announcements . . . So it was a time when I really felt like my job was part of the public good.” Boys & Girls Club director Ryan VandeVere (this volume,



p. 91) expressed a similar view that, despite operational complications during COVID, “the mindset of the mission lives on, and it will always find a way to meet the purpose that it’s there for: to provide our youth with opportunities to grow, learn, and have fun as young citizens in this community.”

Norton Sound Hospital instituted an aggressive COVID-19 testing strategy for Nome and the Bering Strait region as soon as the coronavirus arrived in Alaska. Residents and nonresidents in Nome could receive free rapid response testing inside tents set up outside the Nome Airport, Norton Sound Hospital, and eventually inside the NSHC Operations Building. Nome resident Adem Boeckmann (this volume, p. 80) opined, “We have tested the heck out of it; we have to have some of the highest testing in the state.” Other residents such as Tiffany Martinson (this volume, p. 53) found comfort in the ease of getting tested: “The availability of testing in our area has been tremendous; it was nice to be able to have that opportunity, knowing that it’s not available everywhere.” Emergency room nurse Mary Ruud-Pomrenke (this volume, p. 174) explained how symptomatic patients were tested: “We had a separate room at the hospital—we called it our COVID room—for patients who had symptoms like coughs, fevers, chills, diarrhea, and loss of smell or taste . . . We would go in wearing full PPE, a gown, a mask, a face shield. That’s where we would perform rapid COVID tests. If they had a negative test, we could move them into the ER and continue our routine with patient care.”

The first documented case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Nome on April 14, 2020. At the close of the museum’s second round of oral histories on April 15, 2021, there had been over 200 cases of COVID in Nome. Four participants in this project shared their different experiences with COVID.

For Bering Air employee John Lane (this volume, p. 162), a positive COVID test caused a minor disruption to home and work life: “I had a cold. I had a runny nose for one day. A day and a half later, and I was 100 percent fine . . . to just sit there for ten days, I started getting really upset . . . She [my girlfriend] would leave a tray of food at my doorway, and then we would wait about two or three minutes. She would walk away, and then she would text me, ‘Okay your dinner’s on the tray by your door,’ and then I would sneak out and get it.” Elder Julie Farley (this volume, p. 176) experienced the more severe symptoms of COVID: “It started with a dry cough. Then I started getting cold . . . I couldn’t eat anything except ice water. The phlegm in my mouth was always there . . . While I had the virus, I lost fifteen pounds. . . . I don’t know if I was scared or not, because I didn’t believe in the pandemic . . . I kept telling Howard [my husband], ‘It’s a hoax, Howard.’ Because nobody died in our immediate area. To me, it was a hoax, until I got it.”

Anne Marie Ozenna tested positive for COVID in August 2020 following a shopping trip to Anchorage for her kids’ school supplies that left her weak and nauseous. “I had a runny nose, headache, and fatigue . . . I felt dizzy, light-headed, and was not eating . . . I became more scared when I realized that my daughter and my grandson had caught COVID too . . . When I couldn’t handle my breathing and became more scared from it, I was admitted into the hospital for a couple of days. I just slept and slept” (this volume, p. 168). Three months later in November, Josie Stiles went outside of her “bubble” to join some friends for dinner and started feeling ill a few days later. After several days of chills and sweats, she recalled, “I had no energy. I just stayed in bed. Friends would shop for me and drop off Gatorade and juice and Jell-O . . . I spent Thanksgiv-

ing by myself. My daughter brought me a plate of food with turkey, and a friend brought me a pie . . . I think the worst part for me was being alone” (this volume, p. 170).

An underlying hope to safely resume travel again is woven through several oral history accounts. “I normally frequent Anchorage about every month to visit my brother and to go shopping and dining. It’s strange to have not been on an airplane,” said Josie Bourdon (this volume, p. 72). Bob Metcalf (this volume, p. 158) shared that in August 2020, “we finally decided we needed to see our family. We got tested before we went. We were super cautious. Our granddaughter is eleven years old. She was so happy to see us . . . The most important thing we have had to do is to keep in contact with our family and be a part of their life and her life.”

Project participants stressed the significance of caring for your family and community when asked what they would like Nome residents to remember about the pandemic. “What I want to tell people about this time is the importance of connection with the family and how tight it makes a family become. Your family circle’s going to be the one that holds you up and keeps you glued together,” remarked Josie Bourdon (this volume, p. 73). Kristine McRae (this volume, p. 67) affirmed, “We are a community that supports each other. I think if you were to ask people, ‘What’s your true goal?’ it would be to save lives and to keep people safe.” Mayor John Handeland (this volume, p. 77) concurred that Nome’s community response had shielded the town from the worst of the pandemic but still cautioned, “We need to continue to be vigilant and diligent in our safeguarding of ourselves and others as we’re moving forward. You know the old saying, ‘Those that forget history are doomed to repeat it.’”

## COVID-19 ARTIST INITIATIVE

Indigenous artists from the Bering Strait region have drawn inspiration from local resources for generations and transformed walrus ivory, bone, baleen, animal skins, grasses, and driftwood into items of function and beauty. The early 1900s gold rush brought Euro-American jewelers, photographers, and needle crafters to Nome while Indigenous artists transitioned to making new decorative objects for sale, among them, small animals and figures of walrus ivory, walrus tusks engraved with Arctic scenes, fur appliqué wall hangings, and woven grass baskets. By the time the Spanish Influenza reached the Bering Strait in 1918, engraving on walrus ivory had reached new heights of popularity and realism led by the Inupiaq carver Angokwazhuk, known as “Happy Jack,” and his contemporary Guy Kakarook (Ray 2003) (figure 0.22). Coiled grass baskets woven by Inupiaq women had also flourished and featured decorations that ranged from dyed grasses woven in geometric patterns to small ivory buttons and beaded applique patches (figure 0.23). As influenza spread through Nome in 1918, it took with it many skilled artists, including Happy Jack, who perished in a cabin on the beach alongside his second wife, Assonogy, and their young daughter Sarah (Ray 1984:39, 41). The influenza also took many accomplished basket makers, and grass basketry as an art form almost disappeared from the Seward Peninsula (Phillips-Chan 2019:22; Ray 1996:53–55).

Arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Alaska in March 2020 prompted closure of contemporary art galleries and events across the state, including the Iditarod Art Fair in Nome that frequently brought in artists from across the region. To help offset the loss of sales, the City of Nome offered





FIGURE 0.22. This postcard of Angokwazhuk, titled “Happy Jack, Native of Sledge Island, King of Ivory Carvers,” shows him wearing a reindeer skin parka and matching boots trimmed in wolverine and polar bear fur. Happy Jack was one of the few Inupiaq artists in gold rush Nome to experience renown during his lifetime. Photographer B. B. Dobbs captured this image of Happy Jack around 1905. Collection of the Carrie McLain Museum.

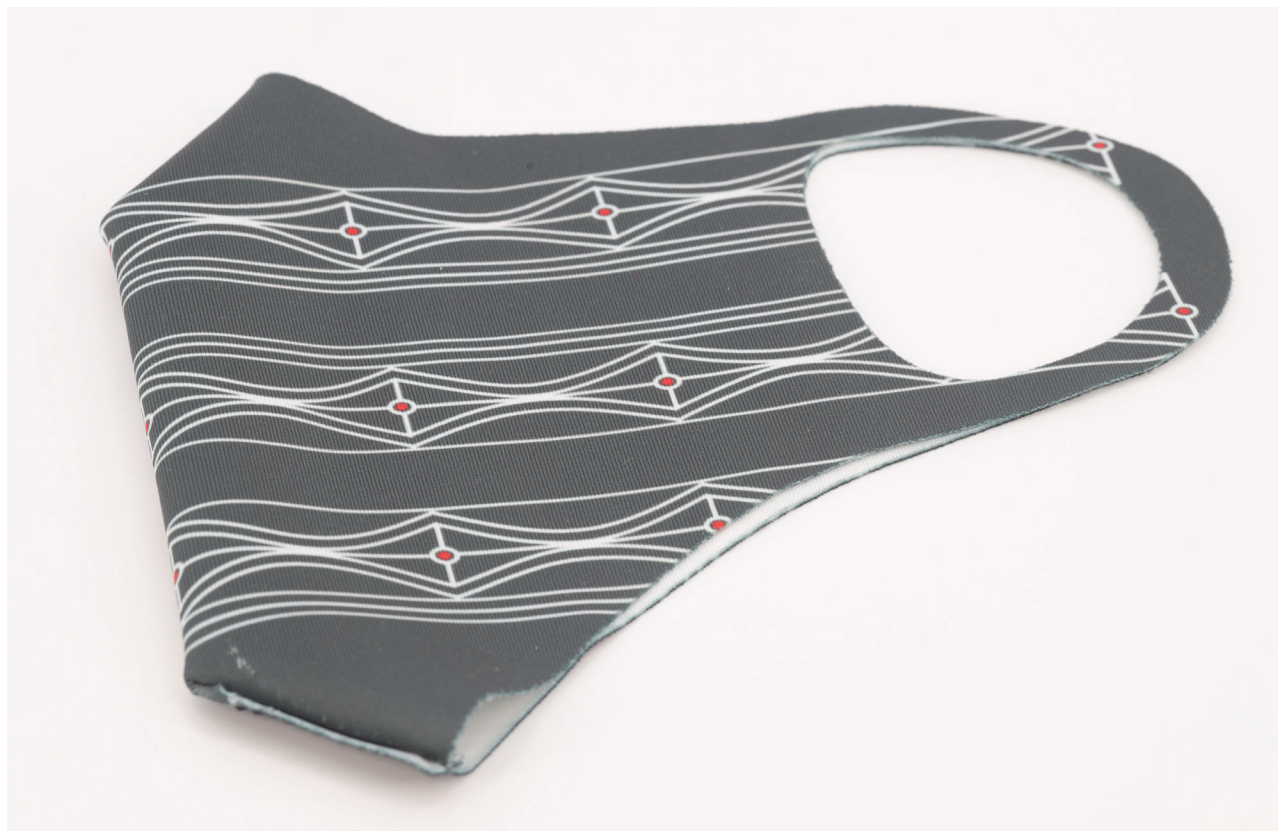


FIGURE 0.23. An Inupiaq artist on the Seward Peninsula wove this coiled grass basket with a triangular pattern and letters that spell out “SHIELDS.” The basket was purchased or gifted to Walter and Julia Shields before the 1918 influenza. Length 30.5 cm (12 in.). CMMM 2017.5.1.

municipal grants of up to \$500 to local artists and carvers in 2020 and again in 2021. The Nome Arts Council held their annual art auction virtually in 2020–2021 to support local artists, who submitted works in ceramics, painting, and textiles, including a face mask with a traditional St. Lawrence Island design by Vera Metcalf (figure 0.24). Other pandemic-themed art events included a “Social Distancing Coloring Contest” featuring a coloring page designed by Nasugraq Rainey Hopson that was sponsored by Norton Sound Health Corporation in May 2020 and a “Virtual Traditional Clothing Fashion Show” organized by the Katirvik Cultural Center in August 2020.

In October 2020, the Carrie McLain Museum began working with visual artists on an initiative

FIGURE 0.24.  
Nome resident  
Vera Metcalf  
designed this face  
mask with a St.  
Lawrence Island  
tattoo design and  
donated it to an on-  
line auction for the  
Nome Arts Council  
in November 2021.  
CMMM 2021.17.1.



to create pandemic-themed artwork. The initiative sought to bring more voices to the *Stronger Together* project, elicit creative reflections on the pandemic, and support artists during a volatile period in the art market. Twelve artists with connections to the Bering Strait region were invited to submit ideas for work that could illustrate their personal thoughts and experiences with COVID-19. Over the next year and a half, artists created work that was purchased by the Carrie McLain Museum for the permanent art collection and for inclusion in the *Stronger Together* publication.

Project budget necessitated a thoughtful approach to selecting artists and creating a visual dialogue representative of diverse heritages, gen-

ders, ages, and artistic mediums. It was also critical that the work be framed from each artist's unique perspective. Because the museum started this project during a pandemic, we had to be flexible in how we communicated with artists. Conversations and informal interviews were held with museum director Amy Phillips-Chan through Facebook messenger, email, in person, over the phone, and via Zoom. Recordings were transcribed, shared with the artists, edited for the project, and archived at the museum. Artists expressed ideas behind their work and offered responses to questions such as: Has the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to you as an artist? Have you or your work benefited in unex-



pected ways from the pandemic? What might the future hold for you as an artist?

Artists spoke to difficulties in acquiring materials during the pandemic. “Last year you could order art supplies online, and they would be here in no time flat. Now a lot of cameras and other supplies are all back-ordered,” said Michael Burnett (this volume, p. 114). Carver Mark Delutak Tetpon (this volume, p. 133) shared a similar experience: “During the pandemic, it has been harder to get the materials I need, particularly quality ivory and quality baleen, because I can’t go and see it.”

Loss of tourism to Alaska and subsequent closure of galleries also affected artists. “Tourism, much of the livelihood of carvers and artists in Alaska, all shut down. I spent hours on the phone listening to stories of hardship. Images of boarded-up stores in downtown Anchorage. I worked extra hard growing a vegetable garden in Nome and putting up fish [catching and preserving fish for future use] expecting disruption of food distribution,” said Karen Olanna (this volume, p. 128). Some Alaskan artists, including Kunaq Tahbone and Jenny Irene Miller, were able to pivot to virtual artist residencies such as those held at the Anchorage Museum (DuBrock and Mickey 2021). Artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs (this volume, p. 144) explained that her work *From the Body, Land, Sea and Air* “was proposed as an in-person reciprocal residency exchange sponsored by the Inuit Arts Foundation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was transformed into a distance exchange with Canadian artist Maureen Gruben . . . we still wanted to work together. So our exchange was spent communicating through FaceTime, on the phone, and via text.”

Several artists who participated in the COVID-19 initiative described benefits from additional time

at home. “During the pandemic, I took a break off of school and it allowed me to stay home . . . I found that I wanted to pursue my art and just work on being an artist. The pandemic kind of made space for that. I was able to launch my art business and make a website,” said Kunaq Tahbone (this volume, p. 104). Karen Garcia (this volume, p. 118) expressed a similar thought: “I have been home a lot during the pandemic, so that has brought on a lot of creativity. I have to say business is booming.”

Other artists emphasized the value of increasing their online marketing efforts. “The COVID-19 pandemic has helped us to learn a lot of things that we would not have learned had this situation not come up. For me, time management was one area where I greatly improved. Creating a website, doing more social media, getting your work on other Facebook pages, basically interacting online with as many people as you can,” said Mark Delutak Tetpon (this volume, p. 133). Ryder Erickson (this volume, p. 122) explained, “A lot of small businesses or mom-and-pop stores were hurt by the pandemic. I don’t have a physical store. I interact with my customers mainly through the phone and internet and was able to fortunately thrive with my online presence.”

Artists also expressed optimism for the future. “Right now I am working on expanding my art mediums. I want to focus on putting more content on my YouTube page to share the skills I am learning so that other people can learn,” shared Kunaq Tahbone (this volume, p. 107). Josie Bourdon (this volume, p. 111) voiced excitement about the return of in-person workshops: “I am looking forward to places like UAF Northwest Campus, where you can do face-to-face teaching for a beading class or fill up an entire classroom instead of having to limit it to ten students.” Sonya Kelliher-Combs (this volume, p. 147) reflected, “This time has allowed many of us

to look closer at our surroundings, both inside and out, and appreciate this beautiful, amazing place we live in. We have learned that we can communicate with, support, and take care of each other from a distance.”

### COMMUNITY STRENGTH IN HARDSHIP

While researching the history of the Spanish Influenza in the Bering Strait, I was struck by the selfless acts of individuals during this period of desperate crisis. In November 1918, the number of influenza cases in Nome and Fort Davis had climbed to 200. Dr. A. N. Kittleson, a retired physician in Nome who had since turned to mining, dusted off his medical supplies and lent his assistance to Dr. Henry Burson, who had become overwhelmed with cases after Dr. Daniel Neuman became infected.<sup>54</sup> Influenza swept through Alaska Native households in the bitter winter, leaving many children homeless or huddled together in freezing cabins. The Sons of the North made one of the first efforts to assist Alaska Natives and turned their hall over to the care of orphans and displaced families. Coast Guard crew members heated the building, gathered mattresses and bedding, and enlisted rotating shifts of volunteers.<sup>55</sup> One of those volunteers was Chris Anderson, who insisted on helping to care for orphans at the Sons of the North Hall until he himself became sick with influenza and perished.<sup>56</sup>

The *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget* aided in the recruitment of local volunteers and admonished that “men and women that are well should show the fine Alaskan spirit of good will and cheerfully give what available time they can to the succor of the afflicted.”<sup>57</sup> The paper also ran a “Call for Volunteers!” by Mayor G. J. Lomen that received a hearty response from local citizens (figure 0.25). Among

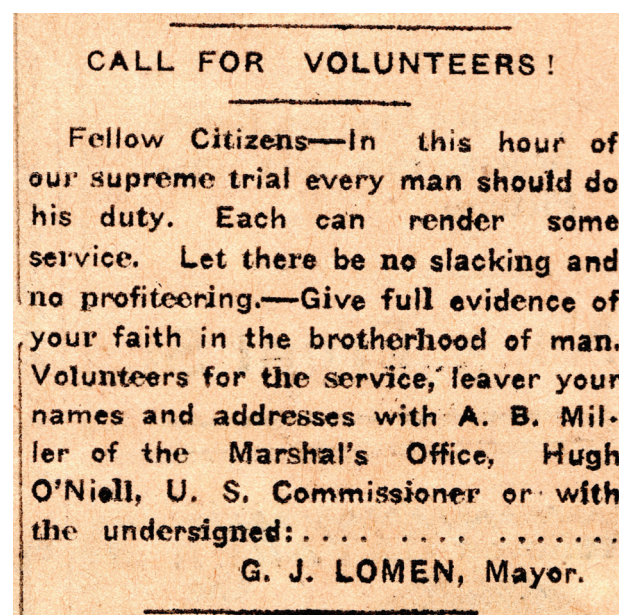


FIGURE 0.25. The *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget* ran a “Call for Volunteers!” issued by City of Nome Mayor G. J. Lomen on November 14, 1918.

the good Samaritans were W. J. Rowe, who sent a horse team carrying supplies to relieve those suffering at Cape Woolley, and Mr. and Mrs. Harry Springstein, who volunteered their services at Holy Cross Hospital for an extended time until Mr. Springstein came down with influenza.<sup>58</sup>

Volunteers from Nome bundled up against the harsh winds and traveled by dogsled to surrounding villages to deliver medical supplies, food, and clothing. In late November 1918, Father LaFortune and Thomas Gaffney set off from Nome for Mary’s Igloo and crossed paths on the trail with Isador Fix and Mat Anderson, who had left the community of Sheldon to also assist Alaska Native families at Mary’s Igloo.<sup>59</sup> To the west, volunteers Joe McArthur and Thomas Jensen arrived in Teller on November 27 to find the village in the grip of the epidemic with even worse reports from Wales.<sup>60</sup> McArthur



returned to Nome for additional help while Jensen hurried on to Wales, where he was soon joined by half a dozen other volunteers including Coastguardsman L. A. Ashton, who drew from his past experience as a naval hospital steward to aid those who were ill.<sup>61</sup> At Wales, volunteers discovered that local teacher Arthur Nagozruk and resident nurse Mrs. Tashner had converted the school into a makeshift hospital with a range in the shop kitchen and patients who were ill placed in the schoolroom. “We worked hard trying to take care of the sick in the schoolroom at the same time sick ourselves before the relief came . . . I had to leave my family every meal time (who were all sick) to feed the orphans in the schoolroom and help cook for them” (Nagozruk 1919:2).

Acts of heroism during the Spanish Influenza were not confined to adults. At Wales, volunteers discovered a nine-year-old girl in an unheated home who had bundled two infants close to her and kept them alive by feeding them cans of milk she had kept from freezing by placing the metal containers next to her skin.<sup>62</sup> Other volunteers located four siblings at Rocky Point who had survived for five days in a fireless cabin after their parents had died. The oldest boy had frozen feet from removing his shoes and socks to provide more clothing for his younger siblings. The boy perished soon after the siblings arrived at Holy Cross Hospital in Nome.<sup>63</sup>

A rich history of Bering Strait residents helping one another shone through again during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nome businesses were some of the first to lend their assistance to those in need. At Bering Tea & Coffee, owner Kristine McRae (this volume, p. 66) noted that staff “brought coffees to the hospital, to Alaska Airlines, to the grocery stores, to some frontline people. It felt good to support the community early on in that way. When

we opened, people were so supportive of us, and that’s what has kept us going.” Local auto repair shop Trinity Sails and Repair (TSR) partnered with Alaska Commercial Company in the spring of 2020 to offer complimentary delivery of groceries to households who were in quarantine or had sick family members. Similarly, Nome community members who tested positive or had been exposed to COVID-19 could call the Norton Sound Health Corporation Quarantine Team to request groceries, supplies, or other support delivered to their home.<sup>64</sup>

Community service organizations in Nome recognized the importance of remaining active to nurture mental health and wellness. At the XYZ Senior Center, director Rhonda Schneider (this volume, p. 91) explained that staff were “looking into creative ways for Elders who have participated in our exercise programs to stay active.” Some activities offered to Elders included bingo games played from a distance and complimentary mini bicycles to promote continued exercise. For local youth, the Kegoayah Kozga Public Library transitioned from in-person preschool programming to curbside delivery of craft kits to-go that included hands-on activities and often a complimentary children’s book. And in August 2020, the Carrie McLain Museum partnered with the Kegoayah Kozga Library and Katirvik Cultural Center to organize a community berry bucket event that encouraged families to spend time together out on the tundra (figure 0.26).

The COVID-19 pandemic also elicited a renewed sense of unity between cultural organizations in Nome and the region. City of Nome manager Glenn Steckman (this volume, p. 79) remarked that “one positive to come out of this is that it allowed the city government to start building a relationship again with Nome Eskimo Community and to also



**FIGURE 0.26.** Nome residents (L–R) Cussy Kauer, Gloria Karmun, and Gloria’s two grandchildren hold berry buckets filled with summer supplies from the Carrie McLain Museum, Kegoayah Kozga Public Library, and Katirvik Cultural Center during a community wellness event in August 2020. Photograph by Amy Phillips-Chan.

build relationships with the tribal organizations, the hospital, and the villages, because we all needed to work together.” Dr. Mark Peterson (this volume, p. 59) of NSHC expressed a similar view: “The history of Alaskans supporting one another really came through during this time. I think it’s going to be the reason that the Bering Strait region will do well.” In thinking of the pandemic’s impact on the next generation, youth pastor James Ventress (this volume, p. 89) asserted, “We do certain things for other people because it’s a service to them of compassion and caring. That ethos is what I hope remains for them.”

## CREATING THE PUBLICATION

This publication represents the work of over sixty individuals who participated in the project at various points over the four-year journey. First and foremost are the fifty-two community con-

tributors who generously shared their struggles, achievements, and hopes during the COVID-19 pandemic through oral histories, original artwork, and thought-provoking poetry. RB Smith and Carol Gales worked with oral history contributors on initial edits of their stories and accompanying photographs. Amy Phillips-Chan worked with artists and poets during creation of pieces that were hand-delivered, emailed, or air freighted to Nome. Project timelines lengthened in lockstep with the pandemic. What was meant to be a single round of oral histories in the fall of 2020 expanded to a second cycle in the spring of 2021. The creative process also pushed schedules, and while the first piece of pandemic-themed artwork was completed in November 2020 the final piece didn’t arrive at the museum until February 2022. Photographer Michael Burnett flew to Nome with tubs of camera equipment in 2021 and again in 2022 to take images of artwork that he edited from his home in Petersburg, Alaska (figure 0.27).

Research for this introductory chapter began in the fall of 2020. The text encompasses one of the most thorough accounts of the Spanish Influenza in the Bering Strait due to the accessibility of original Nome newspapers from 1918 and 1919 in the Carrie McLain Museum archives. The chapter went through several revisions to include up-to-date information as the pandemic continued. Community contributors reviewed their own written submissions, photographs, and captions during initial manuscript preparation and again during layout and design to help check for accuracy and clarity of meaning. Amy Phillips-Chan served as the project manager for *Stronger Together* and provided editorial guidance to community contributors and publication team members to help see the project through to completion in 2023. The final publica-



FIGURE 0.27.  
Photographer  
Michael Burnett  
captures an image  
of *Arctic Tern Mobile*  
by Sylvester Ayek  
for the *Stronger  
Together* publication  
in March 2022.  
Photograph by  
Amy Phillips-Chan.

tion in your hands represents a snapshot in time. The isolation and fears we felt in the spring of 2020 are slowly fading as we learn to live with the virus in our midst. We hope the stories and experiences shared here will resonate with future generations who turn to the past for understanding in another critical moment. As poignantly shared by Elaine Kingeekuk (this volume, p. 143), “This mask has made it possible to put together the knowledge that my whole family gave to me . . . Although it seems like the virus will be here all the time, there is hope in the world. We have someone watching over us.”

## POSTSCRIPT

Two years after the arrival of COVID-19 in Alaska, the community of Nome began to tentatively prepare for mushers to make the final push down Front Street in the 50th Iditarod Trail Sled Dog

Race. Local organizations submitted activities to the special events calendar that ranged from ice sculpting for kids and dogsled rides to a snowshoe hike and reindeer dog grill out. The City of Nome posted COVID precautions and offered free test kits. Then we waited, and held our breath, and watched in awe as each flight of Alaska Airlines delivered a hundred visitors to our iced-in town. The overwhelming return of visitors to Nome stretched from Front Street to the Carrie McLain Museum to the Nome Recreation Center, where hundreds gathered to watch the Lonnie O’Connor Basketball Tournament and celebrate the victorious mushers at the Iditarod Awards Banquet (figure 0.28). In a way, the colorful presence of parka-clad visitors wearing joyful smiles and navigating our slick roads represented a feeling that we had made it, Nome had pulled through together, and the future looked bright.





FIGURE 0.28. The 50th Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race saw a return of visitors to Nome in March 2022. Over 400 guests participated in programs at the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum and expressed enjoyment at being able to travel again after COVID-19. Photograph by Amy Phillips-Chan.



TABLE 0.1. Spanish influenza deaths in the Bering Strait region, 1918–1919

Alaska Native Deaths			Non-Native Deaths	
Community	Native Name	Number	Community	Number
Nome	Sitŋasuaq	175	Victoria Ship Passengers	34
Wales	Kinjigin	170	Nome	27
Mary's Igloo	Tupqaḡruk	68	Fort Davis	5
Teller	Iḡalunŋiaḡvik	65	Bluff	2
Solomon	Anuutaq	45	Teller	1
Sinrock	Sinḡak	37		
Penny River, Cripple River	Sitŋasuaqaq, Kayalashuak	28	Total	69
St. Michael	Taciq	25		
Agiapuk	Mikuqtut	18		
Golovin	Chinik	17		
Eldorado		17		
Spruce Creek	Okpiktulik	16		
Cape Nome	Ayasayaq	14		
Cape Woolley	Singiyak	11		
American River	Oaksuqtit	8		
Safety	Chingyak	7		
Rocky Point	Nuthlunak	5		
Mail Carriers		3		
Total		729		

Sources: Deaths: Kaloke (1979); Nagozruk (1919); *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, 1918, 1919. Native names: Alvanna-Stimpfle (2019); Krauss (1995); Pratt et al. (2013); Ray (1971).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. Historical research for this introductory chapter would not have been undertaken without the accompanying oral histories and artwork from community members that provide rich content and invaluable context for the pandemic. Research on the Spanish Influenza included several intense weeks of scrutinizing the faded print of the *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget* along with searching in the Carrie McLain Museum collections for related photographs, objects, reports,

and oral histories. Gratitude is due to the 1918–1919 staff of the *Nugget* who, despite being laid low with influenza, still managed to put out the paper and leave us a rich historical record. Students of Nome-Beltz High School held a series of oral history interviews in the late 1970s and had the incredible forethought to record some of the last survivors of the Spanish Influenza from the Bering Strait region, who appear here in this text. Finally, Arthur Nagozruk demonstrated tremendous deter-

mination and courage at Wales while serving as the local teacher and unplanned medical assistant in 1918. Nagozruk lost his wife and two sons to influenza in November 1918 and although he caught the flu, he and his daughter Bertha survived (K. Smith and V. Smith 2001:359).<sup>65</sup> Nagozruk drafted a report in the summer of 1919 that detailed how influenza invaded their village and composed a list of all 312 people in Wales with the most demographic information on any Alaska Native community in the region at that time. To Nagozruk and his family I express my deepest admiration and appreciation.

Staff of the *Nome Nugget* newspaper covered the COVID-19 pandemic from its inception and generated an extensive body of local information that I relied upon during preparation of this chapter. Likewise, Norton Sound Hospital disseminated a steady stream of press releases, daily updates, and data dashboards that provided an invaluable method to track the ebb and flow of the pandemic across the Bering Strait region.

Historical photographs in this chapter derive from the archives of the Carrie McLain Museum, with the exception of the image of Fort Davis from the University of Alaska Anchorage Consortium Library. Photographers John Handeland and James Mason generously contributed local images of the COVID-19 pandemic. Professional photographer Michael Burnett captured the images of museum objects.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 48th Annual Meeting of the Alaska Anthropological Association (AkAA) and 2021 Native American Art Studies Association Conference (NAASA). Sincere appreciation goes to my AkAA co-organizer Dawn Biddison and fellow presenters in the session “Alaska Museums and Artists Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic”: Hollis Mickey, Francesca DuBrock, Amy Meissner, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Maureen Gruben, Melissa Shaginoff, Hayley Chambers, RB Smith, and Beth Weigel.

## NOTES

1. Nonuse or use of a tilde, Inupiaq or Iñupiaq, is often dependent upon the location of the community and dialect(s) of Inupiaq spoken. In general, community members in the Bering Strait region speak Inupiaq, whereas those in North Alaska speak Iñupiaq. One can also use Inupiaqtun to refer to the language being spoken, lit. “speaking like an Inupiaq.”
2. *The Nome Gold Digger*, July 4, 1900; Wolfe 1982:105–107.
3. *The Nome Nugget*, January 24, 1925.
4. *The Nome Nugget*, February 14, 1925.
5. *The Nome Nugget*, February 2, 1925.
6. *The Nome Nugget*, February 14, 1925.
7. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, September 13, 1918.
8. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 9, 1918.
9. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 21, 1918.
10. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 25, 1918.
11. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 21, 1918.
12. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 29, 1918.
13. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 4, 1918.
14. Kaloke traveled with his father and the other surviving children from Woolley to the Methodist mission and school at Sinrock, where he remained for a year, before a fire destroyed the mission and the children were resettled at the orphanage in Nome (Kaloke 1979:12–14).
15. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 29, 1918.
16. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 18, 1918.
17. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 2, 1918.
18. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 2, 1918.
19. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 25, 1918.
20. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 30, 1918.
21. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, January 6, 1919.
22. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 29, 1918.
23. That is, *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 13, 1918.
24. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 12, 1918.



25. Carrie McLain Museum, Shields Collection, Accessions 2015.2, 2016.28, 2017.5.
26. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 27, 1918.
27. Carrie McLain Museum, Mielke Collection, Accession 1979.1.
28. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 20, 1918.
29. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 2, 13, 1918.
30. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, January 3, 1919.
31. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, March 21, 1919.
32. *The Nome Nugget*, October 14, 2021.
33. City of Nome Public Service Announcement, April 20, 2020.
34. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 21, 1918.
35. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 12, 1918.
36. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 16, 1918.
37. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 29, 1918.
38. City of Nome Public Service Announcement, March 26, 2020; Mason (2020).
39. City of Nome Public Service Announcement, April 20, 2020.
40. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 18, 1918.
41. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 27, 1918.
42. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, February 7, 1919.
43. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 4, 1918.
44. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 11 and 25, 1918.
45. City of Nome Public Service Announcement, April 2, 2020.
46. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 12, 1918.
47. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, October 29, 1918.
48. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, January 27, 1919.
49. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 22, 1918.
50. The Sheldon Jackson Museum, founded in 1888 in Sitka, was the first major museum in Alaska. An act of Congress in 1900 established the Historical Library and Museum, now the Alaska State Museum, in Juneau. And in 1917, the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks was included as part of the original legislation that established the university.
51. *The Kuskokwim Times*, June 23, 1928. Samuel and his wife, Hazel, had five children and lived most of their life in Nome (Raymond Charles Nuipok, 2012, “Obituary,” *Anchorage Daily News*, June 14). In 1944, Sam received a special service emblem as a civilian employee in Nome with 100 percent War Bond participation (*The Nome Nugget*, September 8, 1944).
52. Nome Communities of Memory Project Jukebox, <https://jukebox.uaf.edu/site7/comnome>.
53. *The Nome Nugget*, October 8, 2020.
54. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 4, 1918.
55. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 12, 1918.
56. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 22, 1918.
57. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 12, 1918.
58. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 14 and 22, 1918.
59. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, November 25, 1918.
60. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 2, 1918.
61. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 6 and 25, 1918.
62. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 30, 1918.
63. *Nome Tri-Weekly Nugget*, December 30, 1918.
64. Norton Sound Health Corporation, Facebook post, February 9, 2022.
65. Nagozruk began his teaching career in Wales in 1907 and taught in several Alaskan villages over the next forty years. In 1919, Nagozruk married Lucy Alvanna Ootuk, whose husband and son had perished during the influenza. Together, the couple had nine children (K. Smith and V. Smith 2001:359–361).





The Richard Foster Building in Nome serves as home to the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, Kegoayah Kozga Public Library, and Katirvik Cultural Center. Photograph by Amy Phillips-Chan.



# PART 1

## *Oral Histories 2020*

*Stronger Together: Bering Strait Communities Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic* began as a grassroots oral history project in the fall of 2020. At the time, the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum (Carrie McLain Museum) had been closed to the public for six months, and staff were searching for an opportunity to reconnect with the community and to document local experiences of the pandemic. As an initial step, the Carrie McLain Museum recruited news reporter RB Smith with the *Nome Nugget* to reach out to local community members and hold oral history interviews. From September 9 to November 12, 2020, Smith conducted twenty oral history interviews with a total of twenty-four participants. Each participant received a \$50 gift card to a local store in addition to a copy of their interview recording and transcription and any photographs taken during the interview.

Part 1 opens with an introspective chapter by RB Smith followed by twenty COVID-19 oral histories from Nome residents in 2020. A short biography precedes each oral history account with details culled from the editors' local knowledge and information shared during the interview process. RB Smith conducted the oral history interviews in person (16), over the phone (2), and via Zoom (2), depending on participant preference. Locations of in-person interviews varied from places of business and the Carrie McLain Museum to participant homes and a restaurant. Although Nome had yet to experience an outbreak of COVID-19 cases, proactive safety measures were observed during in-person interviews including social distancing and use of face masks.

During his visits, Smith talked with community members about their thoughts upon first hearing of COVID-19, challenges they were encountering, activities being pursued for personal wellness, and what they would like future Nome residents to know about 2020.

The oral histories include stories from thirteen women and eleven men. Interviews are arranged by participant profession and include tribal leadership, students, medical personnel, business owners, media, Elders, city leadership, and community service providers as well as a commercial fisherman and a mechanic/welder (table 1.1). A portrait photograph taken by Smith or submitted by the participant is presented alongside a contextual image shared by the interviewee and/or chosen in partnership with the editors. Interviews were edited and abridged for this publication, but each community member participated in the review and final telling of their story.



**TABLE 1.1. COVID-19 oral history participants, 2020**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>	<b>Location</b>
Tiffany Martinson	Tribal Leadership	October 23, 2020	Zoom
Ava Earthman	Student	November 5, 2020	Telephone
Tobin Hobbs	Student	September 25, 2020	Museum
Mark Peterson	Medical Personnel	September 22, 2020	Telephone
Ethan Ahkvaluk	Medical Personnel	October 14, 2020	Museum
Carol Seppilu	Medical Personnel	October 22, 2020	Museum
Truong Phan and Veronica Alviso Phan	Medical Personnel, Business Owner	September 16, 2020	Bering See Vision
Kristine McRae	Business Owner	September 14, 2020	Bering Tea & Coffee
Diana Haecker and Nils Hahn	Business Owner, Media	September 24, 2020	The Nome Nugget
Emily Hofstaedter	Media	November 6, 2020	KNOM Radio Station
Josephine Tatauq Bourdon	Elder	October 14, 2020	UAF Northwest Campus
Katherine Scott	Elder	November 12, 2020	Interviewee Home
John Handeland	City Leadership	September 9, 2020	Nome City Hall
Glenn Steckman	City Leadership	October 9, 2020	Nome City Hall
Adem Boeckmann	Fisherman	September 18, 2020	Airport Pizza
Derek McLarty	Mechanic/Welder	September 21, 2020	The Nome Nugget
Crystal Toolie	Community Service Provider	October 9, 2020	Zoom
MaryJane Litchard	Community Service Provider	September 10, 2020	Museum
James Ventress	Community Service Provider	September 17, 2020	Interviewee Home
Rhonda Schneider, Ruth Ann Glaser, and Ryan VandeVere	Community Service Provider	October 20, 2020	XYZ Senior Center