

Tuberculosis — Ciguut'kaa, Cigaut'kaa (N)

CIGUUT'KAARLUKU TUQULLRIA. – SHE DIED OF TUBERCULOSIS.



Photo: Buster the dog waits outside a quarantine ward at the Baptist Mission, ca. 1944. AM987, Kodiak Baptist Mission Collection.

Known as TB or consumption, tuberculosis once ranked among the most deadly diseases in the world. Caused by the *tubercle bacilli* bacteria, tuberculosis often infects the lungs and spreads to other parts of the body. People typically get the disease by breathing in the bacteria. After the initial infection, TB can lie dormant for years. The first symptom of tuberculosis is a persistent cough. TB can lead to rapid death, but it often progresses slowly, causing chest pain, fever, night sweats, fatigue, and weight loss.

Although tuberculosis may have been present in Alaska before the arrival of Westerners, it spread rapidly to the Native population wherever settlers established colonies. Historic sources indicate that many early explorers had the disease. In the early nineteenth century, tuberculosis was one of the most common illnesses on Kodiak. By 1846, nearly forty percent of Kodiak's population was infected. There were no rapid outbreaks of the disease. Instead, it smoldered in the population, increasing susceptibility to other infectious diseases, disabling the sick, and eventually causing death. In Alutiiq communities, tuberculosis spread through families living together in the close quarters of traditional houses.

The spread of TB in Alaska reached devastating levels in the 1940s and 1950s. Victims of the disease were transported to public sanatoria and many died in distant hospitals, far from home. In rural communities, people with TB simply disappeared forever, as hospitals had no funds to send the dead home for burial. Three Alutiiq men were among the victims of TB who died at the Mt. Edgecombe Indian Health Service Hospital in Sitka. Their remains, originally entombed in a World War II era ammunition bunker, were returned to Kodiak for burial in 2000.