

Tongs — Tuullek, Tuulautek

KENIYAQAMA TUULAUTEK ATURTAAGKA. – WHEN I COOK I USE TONGS.



Photo: Wooden tongs from the Karluk One Site,
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Tongs were common tools in ancestral Alutiiq households. Carvers fashioned these implements by lashing together two lengths of wood shaped with flat oval ends. This created an effective tool for moving hot rocks. Heating rocks was a daily task, as people used hot stones to warm their homes, cook food, and create steam for bathing. Fire reddened and broken rocks are very common finds in ancient settlements and illustrate the regularity of this practice.

Heating rocks for the steambath was an art. Young men competed for this job, which was thought to please the spirit of the steambath and ensure hunting luck. People selected certain types of stone to avoid dangerous explosions. To heat the rocks men created a pile of stones over a carefully laid fire. The builder stacked his firewood in a cone and laid stones over it. If correctly arranged, the wood used to fuel the fire would burn in the middle, causing the stones to fall into the hot coals, and not to roll outward onto the floor.

When the rocks were red hot, men retrieved them from the hearth and passed them into the steambath with tongs. This meant moving blisteringly hot stones from the central room of a sod house, through a narrow tunnel, and into a small room designed for washing. One man worked with a pair of tongs to remove hot rocks from the hearth and then crawled into the tunnel entrance. Here he passed the rocks to a second man equipped with a rock paddle, a flat, wooden scoop. This man took the rocks into the steambath where he arranged them in a pile beside a bucket of water. A splash of water and the room filled with refreshing steam.