

Filmmakers Explore Story of Refuge Rock

Thursday, 27 September 2012

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

On the southeast side of Kodiak Island, near the village of Old Harbor, there is a rock of great significance. Refuge Rock, as it is called, is connected by a small land bridge, though it is only accessible during extremely low tides. One might overlook it, as was done for almost two centuries, but archaeologists and anthropologists have recently realized the historical value of the site as a landmark in the turning point of Russian colonization in Alaska.

Two Portland, Ore., film makers, Torsten Kjellstrand and Jamie Francis, found themselves, through chance encounters, filming a documentary about the site, its history, and Isabella Blatchford's quest to visit it.

-- (Alutiiq Documentary 1 :52 "Torsten and I were both living in Portland at the time and Torsten met a lady there who's from Kodiak and their relationship developed into one of friendship. And she felt a reason to come back to her home after talking with Sven and some folks at the Alutiiq museum I think, I don't want to put words in her mind, but she felt like refuge rock was something very powerful for her and not only her personally but in the make up of who her identity as a people as the broader self. And it became a quest for her to want to go there and stand on refuge rock. And just as experiential people, Torsten and I both saw this as an incredible experience in someone's life and also it just sounds like an incredible story.")

The two filmmakers followed Isabella Blatchford to Kodiak a year ago to document her quest. It's a story that Francis says brought the duo back this summer for a second year of filming.

-- (Alutiiq Documentary 2 :24 "There are lots of complications not just to the story of refuge rock but Isabella had breast cancer and she has passed away since we were here last year. So we're back this year to fill out a lot of the context for the story and to bring I guess a broader scope of identity to the things Isabella expressed so well to us last year in our trip here.")

But Kjellstrand says the story of refuge rock is complicated, and conveying a history that was only recently rediscovered is no easy task.

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 (Alutiiq Documentary 3 : 47 “We aren’t the experts on that but the basics of the story are that when Russian fur traders and Russian explorers came to this area they met quite fierce resistance from the Alutiiq. And over a period of time there was conflict over that. Refuge rock was a place where people went to escape invading peoples and many Alutiiq people went to refuge rock to escape the Russians who were coming and it was the first time, according to what we’re hearing, that the Russians had cannons and muskets. There was essentially a massacre at refuge rock. And it was in many people’s eyes and I think in ours at this point, where the conquest of Alaska by the Russians began, or Kodiak Island anyway that began.”)

While

oral and written records have conveyed the story of the Battle of Refuge Rock, Kjellstrand it wasn’t until the early 1990s that the location matching the descriptions was found.

-- (Alutiiq Documentary 4 : 25
 “It was not known where it was until some anthropologists, including Sven Haakanson at the Alutiiq Museum, found the place and identified it in the early nineties. So it’s very recent. So people have had to decide what to do with that knowledge and I think that is part of what this documentary is about, is what to do with that place, with that knowledge, with the history.”)

Kjellstrand and Francis have a background in visual journalism. Their company, Dog Mountain Productions, is relatively new and, until now, has only worked with still photography and short films. Kjellstrand says this documentary will mark their first hour-long endeavor

-- (Alutiiq Documentary 5 : 32
 “Well I think the hardest part of a documentary is to make it not boring. And the way to make it not boring is to have it mean something to not only the people you’re following and the people viewing it but also those of us making the film. And that’s not a problem with this one. We became very fond of Isabella and very invested in her story and so it’s not at all hard for us to be emotionally committed to doing this. Which is great. Because if you don’t have that it’s really hard to fake it.”)

The pair said they hope to spend the winter evaluating their footage and return to Kodiak once more in the spring. The documentary will eventually air on public television, but not until sometime in 2014. To hear the full interview with Kjellstrand and Francis, tune into KMXT’s Talk of the Rock at 12:30 p.m. on Tuesday.

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