History of Middleton Island

Location

Middleton Island is a small island in the Gulf of Alaska. It lies almost due South of Cordova, Alaska near the continental shelf. Middleton Island is 70 miles from the Alaska Mainland, and 50 miles from the nearest island. The island is approximately 4½ miles long and 1 mile wide at the widest point. There are about 2,200 acres on the island.

Middleton Island is oriented roughly parallel to the magnetic North-South line at a lattitude of 59° 0' 26" North and a longitude of 146° 20' 0" West approximately. Its comparatively low grass covered surface is difficult to pick up when trying to make a landfall. From a few miles off shore, the island appears flat. A pinnacle rock at the extreme Southern end is visible from either an Eastwardly or Westwardly direction.

Reefs, rocks and heavy kelp fringes the island to a distance of 0.4 miles. Breakers occur at greater distances. Foul ground extends 2 miles Southward of the island, terminating in breakers, except in very smooth weather. This side of the island should be given a wide berth. The waters Westward of the island are clear of off-lying dangers, giving an easy approach to the only safe anchorage from this direction. This anchorage is about 1/2 mile from the middle of the island in 10 to 12 fathoms of water. This area provides the best shelter from the prevailing Eastwardly gales. The best landing place is in the beight on the Western side. At low water, the shore 100 yards South of this spot is calm, due to the protection of a small hooked gravel spit of land which bares at low tide. About 4 miles, 450° from the Northern end of the island lies another rock (known as Fountain Rock). This breaks only in rough weather. It is in 4½ fathoms of water, although shallower water may be found. Fountain Rock and the area surrounding it should also be given a wide berth.

A landing on Middleton Island is accomplished only by going through the surf and breakers in a small boat. This is hazardous because of the shoal water surrounding the island, and the lack of a sheltered harbor. The remains of the S. S. Coldbrook, and a small fishing boat, which are visible from the island attest the inhospitality of the adjacent waters to marine traffic.

Geology

The island bedrock is composed mainly of moderately indurated marine glacial sediments, deposited during the late Centozoic era. It has been tilted to the Northwest and later planed off by the waves. Many large foreign boulders, up to 10 feet in diameter, were deposited on the initial wave-cut bedrock during the Pleistocene time, either by large icebergs, or by a glacier that formed an ice shelf along the present shore of the mainland and extended some 70 miles to the South. The bedrock contains rounded to angular rock fragments, and deposits of clay, sand, silt and gravel. These deposits overlying the bedrock represent a predominately residual material derived from waves more than 30 feet in thickness. The bedrock itself can best be described as a massive "conglomeratic" sand mudstone, and it contains large inclusions of marine fossils.

After a long period of submergence, the island was elevated by a series of pulsations, thereby allowing for the five distinct terraces, ranging from 10 to 105 feet in height. These terraces are the most striking feature on the surface of Middleton Island. Located on top of the highest terrace are several rows of conical mounds. The mounds rise above the general level of the highest terraces to a height of 20 feet, bring the altitude of the island to a maximum of 126 feet above sea level. The lower terrace - 10 to 45 feet - slope off gradually near the North end of the island, merging into the present beach and an area of irregular s d dunes. A low spit of sand and gravel forms the North end of the island.

Steep sea cliffs, undergoing rapid erosion, forms the high-tide shoreline around much of the island. The cliffs range from 10 to 45 feet in the height at the East and Southeast shore, to the maximum height of 110 feet as it intersects successively the higher 65, 85, and 105 foot terraces.

Geologists, using sea bottom cores from several localities, believe that Middleton Island represents 4,500,000 years.

Climate

Middleton Island has a maritime climate with moderate temperatures. The lowest recorded temperature was -5 degrees in February of '56.' The highest recorded was 73 degrees. The average temperature for 1956 was 40.3°, with the warmest month, August, having an average temperature of 53.3 degrees. The long term mean temperature is 42.1 degrees. Precipitation averages 61.48 inches, although, during 1956 the total rainfall was 51.4 inches, a departure of .10 inches from the long term mean.

High winds are common, especially during the colder months. During the winter, the prevailing wind direction is mainly from the North and East, while in Summer, the wind comes from the Southeast. The highest recorded wind speed was 72 miles per hour, with gusts estimated up to 135 mph.

The following climatological survey, 1950 - 1956 is factual and reliable for that period.

Mean Temperature	42.1 degrees
Mean Maximum Temp	45.6 degrees
Mean Maximum temp	38.6 degrees
Lowest Recorded Temp	-5.0 degrees
Highest Recorded Temp	73.0 degrees
Precipitation for '56'	51.4 inches
Mean Precipitation	61.0 inches
Greatest rainfall in 24 hours	5.4 inches
Snowfall for '56'	31.5 inches
Mean Snowfall	32.5 inches
Greatest snowfall in 24 hours	9.0 inches
Mean wind velocity	10-15 mph
Mean wind velocity	72 mph gusting up to 135 mph est.
Prevailing wind direction	Summer-Southwest Winter-North and East
Direction of maximum wind	East

History

Middleton Island, at one time was inhabited by Indians belonging to the Chugatches Tribe. The Indians were friendly, but for some unknown reason, they turned hostile.

During the early 1700's, Gerrossin G. Ismailof, a Russian, set sail for what was then called Achakoo Island. He was under the impression that the island was abounding with sea otter. Guided by an Indian pilot, Ismailof soon arrived at the island. The ship being too big to make a landing, was forced to remain in the deep water some distance off shore. A smaller boat was launched with 18 men, including the Indian. After trading amicably for some time, Ismailof sent a part of 8 men in search of eggs along the cliffs. The men returned quickly, reporting that several boats were approaching the island. Suspicion was heavy over the group of men, and increased greatly when it was noted that the guide was missing. The Chief of the arriving Indians professed no knowledge of the deserter, and offered to go in search of him with five Russians. Four of the men were sent into the interior of the island on a false trail, while the Chief furiously attacked the fifth. One of the four returned to help his companion, and after a severe struggle, the Chief was dispatched with a musket ball. As soon as the others returned, the party hurried aboard their ship, hauled anchor, and with all possible speed, departed the island.

In 1791, the Spaniards landed on the island, naming it the Isla De Higiso. On some Russian charts, it is called Kackek, or Kachek. The Indian names for the island are: Octhaka, Achek, and Ochek. The name "Achakoo" is Indian meaning "without harbor." The present name derived from the name of Henery Middleton.

Henery Middleton was an American Minister to Russia, (1820-1830). Mr. Middleton negotiated a t eaty with the Russians in 1824. This treaty regulated trade and fisheries in the Pacific Ocean, and the North West Coast. It also established the line of 50° 40' as the Southern limit of Russian expansion.

Since 1890, Middleton Island has been homesteaded by several people, although no claim for a homestead has actually been filed. One claim was attempted, but it was never completed.

Of the several people living on the island, was a man and his wife from Boston. Once a year, the man and his wife would make the trip to Cordova, Alaska to pick up their years supplies. Among the thing they picked up, was a years back issues of the Boston Transcript and each morning, they would read the paper, exactly one year old. It is not known as to how long the two lived on the island.

Following the Boston people, two men began a fox farm on the island. The two partners lived on the island for some time, and prospered very well with the blue fox. Besides the return from the fox pelts, after a particular type of storm, the two men scopped up nine casks of black sand. They shipped this

sand to a smelter for which they received $900.00. Such a windfall occured only after a certain combination of very high winds and tide. There were no dates to be found on the length of time that these men were on the Island.

A man by the name of Thomas Smith, from Maine, followed the two partners. Like many of the Easterners, Smith was caught up in the mad rush for gold. He landed in Valdez in the Spring of 1898, and set out to make his fortune. Being a man of action, Smith soon had a comfortable living place.

The reports coming from Valdez Trail were mostly hearsay, but Smith picked enough truth and facts to cause him to hesitate before risking his life in the wilds of Alaska. He was unsure of this risk and it was this uncertainty that caused Smith to spend five years of his life in complete loneliness. While he was trying to make up his mind, he met a new arrival in Valdez. This new acquiantance let him make up his mind thoroughly. The man was one of the two men who had the first fox farm on Middleton. His partner had died during the Winter, and he didn't want to live alone on the island. For this reason, he was willing to sell his rights on the island for a fraction of the true value.

Smith was interested and satisfied with the story of the man, rightly judging him to be thoroughly honest, and found the proposition appealing. With adverse reports still flowing in from the Valdez Trail, Smith decided to venture into the fox farming business. He knew the sea, and he had no fear of the lonely life the interprise would entail. The deal was soon closed and Thomas Smith became the sole owner of Middleton Island, subject to squatters rights.

Smith, knowing that he would have to know more than just a basic knowledge of fox farming, began visiting other fox farms. He sailed to the Naked Islands and Pribily Islands, in search for the needed information. The information was given him freely, and upon his departure for Valdez, he bought several pairs of foxes. It was arranged to have the foxes sent to Middleton after he had settled down on the island.

Upon his arrival in Valdez, Smith set about preparing for the trip to his future home. After looking around for awhile, he found the boat that he wanted, and gave it a complete overhaul, including a new coat of paint. Then he gathered together a years supply of food and equipment. His only aids to navigation were a compass and a hand drawn map, with the direction to his distination - a mere 150 miles away in the vast sea.

One day in June, with a fair wind blowing down through the straits, Smith set sail on a voyage never before undertaken under similar circumstances and conditions, to a life alone in complete isolation.

It was late in May the following year before anything more was learned of Smith. Then he came sailing into the Valdez harbor before a fresh Westerly breeze and landed on the beach. It was only in May or June that Smith would leave his foxes to fend for themselves. At that time the island was teaming with sea fowl, and feed was in abundance there for the taking. It was also the time that constituted the best sailing weather to navigate the 150 miles

of stormy sea to Valdez for the years supplies.

During all other seasons, the foxes were fed prepared feed delivered to their burrows. He had rigged up a cart on which he loaded the feed and pushed it around the island.

On one of his return trips to the island, Smith ran into a storm. It was three days before the sea calmed down enough to permit a landing, otherwise, the boat and cargo would have suffered severe damage.

At other times, he met with adverse winds and tides which forced him to spend long hours at the oars. Those occasions were the most trying of all, calling for all the reserve strength and stamina he had, hour after hour, day or night. The long hours that he spent on the oars were all that saved him from being swept off course.

Through it all he prospered with his foxes, and brough in some of the finest pelts ever seen in Valdez. For five years, Thomas Smith kept his lonely vigil on bleak Middleton Island. Then he decided that with the return from all the foxes on the island, he would have enough money to leave Alaska. He wanted a place on the Pacific Coast, a place where he could live a somewhat less lonely and strenous life. With that thought in mind, Thomas Smith abandoned Middleton Island in 1903.

The Federal Aviation Administration is located at the North end of the island. It was established in 1941. After the completion of the station, the personnel had to wait about seven months before a plane could land. The road leading to the old dump was originally intended for a landing strip, but the idea was dropped soon after the first plane attempted a landing. It was noted at that time, that the strip was heading straight into one of the houses. A B-17 tried to make the first landing, but didn't touch down. Food and reading material was dropped a week later. Before this drop was made, the personnel were eating beans and sea gull eggs.

The personnel of the FAA site do not have a doctor available for their own use. The medical technician and the A.F. dispensary of the military station on the island is available to them. All emergency cases are flown to either Cordova or Anchorage.

The U. S. Coast Guard operated a station on the island for several years. The site contained seven buildings. One was a two-story structure, serving as living quarters and dining hall. Only one of the buildings remains today. It is used as a storage area by the U.S. Air Force.

The ship that lies off-shore, is the remains of the S.S. Coldbrook. It was owned and operated by the U.S. Mail Line. The ship was covered with armor plating during the war. In 1944, the ship was enroute to Anchorage with a load of coke. During the trip, the vessel ran into a storm. The plating and the cargo of coke was well over the maximum load limit, causing the seams to burst during the storm. It was then beached intentionally. In 1947, the ship was salvaged by

the Morrison-Knudsen Company. This is the same company that built the Air Force Station a few years later.

In February, 1956, the 720th Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron, under the command of the U.S. Air Force, went into operation. This station was the first to go into operation in Sector One.

Construction was accomplished by the Morrison-Knudsen Company, under the supervision of the Alaska District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The site consists of a complete Air Force station, with troop housing, technical facilities, utilities, powerplant, P.O.L. System, water reservoir, roads, base transportation, 5,000 foot plus runway, and recreational facilities.

Once a year, the site receives a years supply of dry goods, frozen foods, and P.O.L. products. Fresh vegetables are flown in once a week. Linen, parts, and other needed items are flown in on C-123's once or twice a week, depending on the weather.

Mail is received twice a week, usually on Monday and again on Friday. Cordova Airlines has the contract to carry the mail, and to transport site personnel to and from the island.