

## **Biography Shem Pete**

Imagine if places had no names. The very thought seems ridiculous. Yet, early British, Russian and American maps of Alaska showed vast areas of land and water with no names. Over time this situation changed dramatically with names being added by explorers and later Russian and American settlers.

Hidden beneath the original “blank” spaces on the early maps and the words on today’s maps are a vast number of place names belonging to the Native populations of Alaska.

The place names were established over a long time period having been passed down to succeeding generations through story telling and the experiences of living in an area.

One of the greatest modern recorders of traditional place names in the world was Shem Pete. He lived in the Upper Cook Inlet region of Alaska. This area has a highly varied topography with mountains, hills, streams, lakes, and salt water shorelines. Shem Pete knew the area well.

He was born between 1896 and 1898 in the area of Susitna Station, where he lived until the mid-1930s. At that time he moved to Tyonek along the shores of Cook Inlet. Later, he would spend time living in Anchorage, but most of his life spent in the Nancy Lake area and Tyonek.

Shem Pete, for the most part, lived a traditional Dena’ina subsistence lifestyle of hunting, fishing, and trapping. This lifestyle took him over large areas of the Upper Cook Inlet Basin. One estimate places his travels as covering nearly 13,000 square miles of territory.

Shem Pete learned many traditional stories and songs about the region. To this he added his personal observations and knowledge of detailed landscape features and places he visited.

Shem Pete possessed an extraordinary memory of places and their names. His knowledge extended to some 650 Dena’ina place names in the Upper Cook Inlet region. Additionally, he knew numerous Russian and English names of places. In modern terminology, he was an expert in toponomy--place names.

Shem Pete died in 1989. Fortunately, he had an excellent memory a strong desire to share his vast knowledge of the region with future generations.

Reference:

Kari, James and James A. Fall. 2003. Shem Pete’s Alaska: The Territory of the Upper Cook Inlet Dena’ina. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. 2nd Edition.