

FREDERICA DE LAGUNA (1906-2004)

When Frederica de Laguna died on October 6, 2004, North America lost a great archaeologist, anthropologist, and ethnographer. Her full name was Frederica Annis Lopez de Leo de Laguna, but throughout her life, to her friends and colleagues, she was simply “Freddy.”

Born on October 3, 1906, Freddy was frail and often ill as a child, so her parents, professors of philosophy at Bryn Mawr College, educated her at home. By her teenage years, she was in good health. In 1914-15, she accompanied her parents to England on their sabbatical leave. Upon their return, she was enrolled in the Phoebe Anne Thorne School, where she received a classical education and was tutored in French. The classes were held outdoors, and for the rest of her life, Freddy loved to work outside, in the mountains and along the coasts and rivers, in all kinds of weather.

On a second sabbatical in 1921-22, Freddy’s family lived in France, where she was enrolled in the Lycée de Jeunes Filles in Versailles. She entered Bryn Mawr College the following year, to major in economics and political science. After graduating in 1927, she spent a year at Columbia University studying anthropology, linguistics, and folklore. She attended a weekly seminar under Franz Boas, who suggested that she continue her studies for a doctorate and examine the relationship between Upper Paleolithic and Inuit art.

Meeting Boas was a turning point in Freddy’s life, and as an anthropologist, she remained a true “Boasian”: she was always more interested in facts and data, life histories, languages, and the historical record than she was in theories and speculation.

In 1928, Freddy went to England and then to France to study prehistoric art. Returning to England in January 1929, she participated in a seminar directed by Bronislaw Malinowski. Her travels to research Eskimo and Paleolithic art then took her to Copenhagen, Denmark. There she met Kaj Birket-Smith, as well as Therkel Mathiasen, who invited her to accompany him to Greenland and help with his archaeological excavations. What was intended to be a six-week project turned into a six-month study of Eskimo archaeology and anthropology. Afterwards, she returned to her graduate studies at Columbia University, but this first field experience was so important to Freddy that her autobiography of her early life, published in 1977, is entitled *Voyage to Greenland: A Personal Initiation into Anthropology*.

Kaj Birket-Smith had arranged for an archaeological study at Prince William Sound, Alaska, in the summer of 1930. However, he was ill, and so Freddy and her brother, Wallace, went to Alaska to identify potential archaeological sites for later excavation. Later that summer, Freddy traveled alone to Cook Inlet and carried out preliminary archaeological excavations. Her father died that fall. In the following two years, she returned to Cook Inlet for more research on the prehistory of the area.



Frederica de Laguna.

In 1933, the same year she received her doctorate in anthropology at Columbia, Freddy returned with Kaj Birket-Smith to Prince William Sound, where they excavated several sites and did anthropological research among the Eyak. Two years later, she herself led a group of researchers on a boat trip down the Yukon River.

Freddy then worked for the U.S. Soil Conservation Service on the Pima Reservation in the Southwest, surveying the social and economic conditions of the Indians. Hired by Bryn Mawr as a lecturer in anthropology in the fall of 1938, she returned to Arizona for further research in the summers of 1939 and 1940, accompanied by her mother. The following year, she conducted an archaeological field school in cooperation with the Museum of Northern Arizona. During those same years, she was the President of the Philadelphia Anthropological Society.

During World War II, Freddy served in the U.S. Navy from 1942 to 1945, attaining the rank of Lieutenant Commander. At first she taught naval history, but later she was transferred to Naval Intelligence in Washington, D.C.

Freddy returned to Bryn Mawr in 1946, became chairman of the new Department of Sociology and Anthropology in 1950 and full professor in 1955, and 12 years later was appointed head of the new, independent Department of Anthropology. Through the years, she developed a complete program in anthropology from the undergraduate to the doctoral level.

Meanwhile, Freddy had returned to Alaska in 1949 to excavate prehistoric and historic sites near the village of Angoon. *The Story of a Tlingit Community: A Problem in the Relationship between Archaeological, Ethnological and Historical Methods* was published in 1960. That same

year, Freddy began her long and extensive research of the prehistory, history, and traditional and contemporary life of the people of Yakutat. In addition, she and Catherine McClellan spent the summers of 1954, 1958, and 1960 among the Ahtna Indians on the upper Copper River.

From 1965 to 1967, Freddy was first president-elect, and then president, of the American Anthropological Association.

Freddy continued to teach at Bryn Mawr until 1975, when she was obliged to leave under the school's mandatory retirement policy. She was then 69 years old, but she never stopped researching and writing. After her mother's death in 1979, she went back to Greenland for further ethnological research. In the following decade, she visited Spain, Austria, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Japan, as well as returning several times to Alaska. In 1986, the people of Yakutat not only welcomed her back "home," but also honored her as a respected elder.

Throughout her career, Freddy published many papers, scientific reports, and articles on a variety of topics in anthropology and archaeology. She also published 14 books, including two murder mysteries. Her earlier works on Alaskan prehistory, now considered classics, are still consulted by archaeologists. *Under Mount St. Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*, a monumental study in three volumes, is perhaps the finest ethnography of any northern people. Freddy also assembled over many years the notes and manuscripts of Lt. G.T. Emmons (1852–1945), who had lived and worked with the Tlingit in the late 1800s. The resulting publication, *The Tlingit Indians* by George Thornton Emmons, edited with annotations by Frederica de Laguna (1991), is the most comprehensive ethnography of the Tlingit, their culture, and their history.

In Freddy's later years, her eyesight began to fail. By 2003, though still able to read large print, she was legally blind. She continued communicating with others either in person or by telephone, and despite her poor vision, she published several more books based on her earlier experiences in Alaska. Shortly before she died, she completed her last book, *Myths and Tales from the Chugach of Prince William Sound*.

One of Freddy's final dreams has been realized. She wanted to establish a press to re-publish important earlier works and to promote new research on the anthropology of the North. Her student and friend, Marie-Françoise Guédon, worked with her on this project. The press, Frederica de Laguna Northern Books (<http://www.fredericadegaluna.com>), is now re-issuing *Under Mount St. Elias* and other classic works. In future, the press hopes to publish some of the articles and other material that Freddy was unable to complete before her death.

I talked with Freddy on the telephone on October 1, 2004—five days before her death. We chatted for half an hour. For the first five minutes, we discussed her health and upcoming birthday, but then she changed the conversation back to her favorite topics—anthropology, archaeology, and history. At 98 years of age, although her voice was weak at times, her mind and memory were very clear. She lived and loved anthropology to her final days.

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