

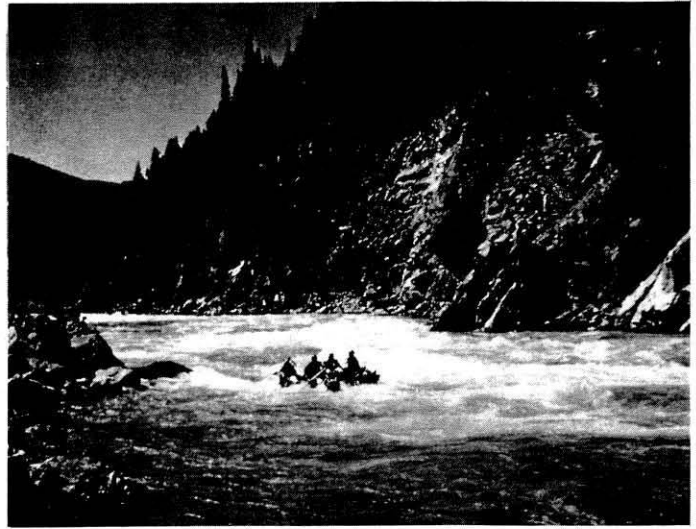
then retire to lower altitudes for the winter. From the appearance of their comfortable two-room cottage, solidly built of hand-hewn timbers chinked with mortar, it looked as if they could get along all year in the Altay if the bees would have found it salubrious.

Downstream next day, our social program came completely unglued. Sighting the well-weathered frame structures of Kaytanak, the village nearest to the Katun's headwaters, I asked Misha if a stop was possible. "Twenty minutes," came his quick reply.

When we assembled on the bank, the question had obviously become more complex. Sasha, the teacher from nearby Ust-Koksa, lowered his head while the other Soviets gathered round to hear him out. Result: no go — back in the cats. Over lunch Sasha's concern surfaced in the form of that perennial Russian fear of showing foreigners something less than perfect. Kaytanak, a pre-Revolutionary village of only modest prosperity, was deemed unsuitable. Mike Springer put our side of the issue: that it was better to show everything —warts included—than to hold sympathetic visitors at bay. We were mollified by promises of a tour of Ust-Koksa, just ahead, and our appreciation that the region was being opened to Westerners for the first time in generations. Inevitably, we became "point men" on such problems.

Some three hours later, in high anticipation, Americans and Soviets started across a swinging bridge connecting an island with Ust-Koksa. From the other side there advanced a stocky, gray-uniformed militiaman — the police. Firm in the right as his captain gave him to see the right, he grabbed each railing and told everyone, in effect, that these were not visiting hours. Our Soviets put up a good argument, but it all came to a familiar conclusion: no go — back in the cats.

Later on we pieced together the likely events behind this bizarre scenario. An hour after our pulling out of Kaytanak the California rafters appeared. A colorful crowd with tie-dye wardrobe and flip-flops, they bounded into town to have



one great time: full tour with a visit to school in session, detailed exchanges on organic gardening, even a much-needed back massage for one. I can imagine the panicky call from Kaytanak's chief militiaman down to Ust-Koksa . . . Intruders have landed, defend your walls! The phone was barely cradled, then there we were, mistaken for Californians (particularly distressing to an Easterner).

In camp that evening there was what the State Department calls a "frank exchange of views." This village stiff-arm had to stop. It did. A few miles downstream the Soviets ushered us into Upper Uymon where we experienced a day-long visit to a charming, quintessential Siberian community. Described by an old lady as one of the first villages established during Russian colonization of the Altay the 1870s, Upper Uymon had a foot in both centuries. Many of the traditional Hansel and Gretel log homes dated from the early days, one even displaying ancient Christian icons in a revered corner. Down the road our era intruded. Motorbikes

were parked outside Sergei Ilych's modern rambler and the TV was on. Sergei, director of the local collective farm, invited us in for a lunch of dried mural (similar to elk), bread with honey, and the everpresent tea.

There was a moving moment on our tour of the village museum. I asked the attractive, young guide how many from Upper Uymon had served in World War I. "A hundred men were called," she said. Then, dropping her voice, "and twenty-nine came back."

Just an inkling of the tragedy this land endured. But out on the wide dirt streets life went on. Kids thrilled to gaze through Ken's telephoto lens; an old man proffered pine nuts along with questions about the States; and finally two pretty, pre-teen girls waved a wistful goodbye. From all reports of later travellers on the Katun there have been no problems

