ALASKA SCRAPBOOK - JULY 7, 1901: Birth of Frank Auvnue Degnan

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Alaska Native leader Frank Auvnue Degnan was born July 7, 1901, in St. Michael. He was the only living child of Apok (Martha Annie Apok Degnan ) and Francis Gerald Degnan . Degnan 's Inuit name Auvnue means "cottonwood bark."

Degnan 's life is chronicled in his daughter Frances Ann Degnan 's 1999 book, "Under the Arctic Sun: The Life and Times of Frank and Ada Degnan ." In it, Frances Degnan notes that Degnan 's grandfather Auvnue was the last of the truly Unalit chiefs, whose life spanned the end of the Russian era in Alaska and ushered in the new era of American intrusion into Northwest Alaska.

Frank Degnan 's family moved to Unalakleet when he was a child. His parents were close friends with the parents of Ada Johnsson, who eventually became his wife on June 26, 1934. The couple had 10 children.

Degnan held a number of local leadership positions in the village and also later served as the station manager for Wien Consolidated Airlines. Throughout his life, he nurtured his growing family with subsistence resources, and one of his key goals in statewide leadership was to protect Alaska Natives' access to the land and its resources.

Degnan was a co-founder of the Alaska Native Industries Cooperative Association in 1947, and in 1950 he was elected as the first Yup'ik legislator in the Alaska Territorial Legislature. In the early 1960s, he represented Unalakleet at the first Inupiaq Paitot, a conference of northern Alaska indigenous people that focused its attention on aboriginal rights. Addressing the gathering, Degnan urged people to push for their rights: "You people here in Barrow, if you had your aboriginal claim, you would have gas today. And you would be collecting royalty from the people that come here. Standard Oil, the Army or Navy or whoever came. We were asleep when this happened. But today we are awake."

In 1966, he was one of the founding delegates to the statewide conference that became the Alaska Federation of Natives. Later, he testified in favor of Native land claims in Washington, D.C. In 1971, he was honored as the first AFN Citizen of the Year. The University of Alaska Fairbanks bestowed an honorary doctorate of public service on him on May 18, 1975.

Degnan died on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 27, 1980.