



**A Comeback** — Members of the King Island Dance Group perform the Wolf Dance at the Bering Straits Elders Conference in Nome. The performance marked the first time the dance has been produced since the Aug. 11, 1931 visit of Charles and Anne Lindbergh.



Photos copyright Sabra McCracken

Tesesa Kunuk of King Island, practices the moves along with the members of the dance group.

# Historic Wolf dance performed in Nome

By Sabra McCracken  
for the Tundra Times

NOME — Resembling eagles soaring through the sky, the King Island Dancers did what no one has done in five decades — perform the ancient Eskimo Wolf Dance.

For 64-year-old Paul Tiulana, it was more than a dance or a ritual. It was something he's dreamed about seeing for years.

Tiulana remembers well the day in August 1931 when the Wolf Dance was performed for Charles and Anne Lindbergh

as they stopped in Nome enroute to the Orient after an inaugural flight across Canada and Alaska.

For years, this King Island elder has yearned to revive the Wolf Dance.

"If we lose our culture, we lose everything," Tiulana said. "That's why it was very important to bring the Wolf Dance back."

Last week, the dance troupe dazzled a standing room only crowd of more than 2,500 people in Nome who met for the Bering Straits El-

ders Conference. The gatherers streamed into the aisles at the National Guard Armory to witness a dance which dates back thousands of years.

The long-awaited spectacle began with the custom of giving or exchanging gifts. The dancers distributed oranges, apples and candy to the crowd. Children scurried everywhere candy was tossed.

A long box representing a wolf den had been placed on the stage. Four equally-spaced round holes were cut in the box and covered with seal

skins. They were just large enough for the dancers to slip through.

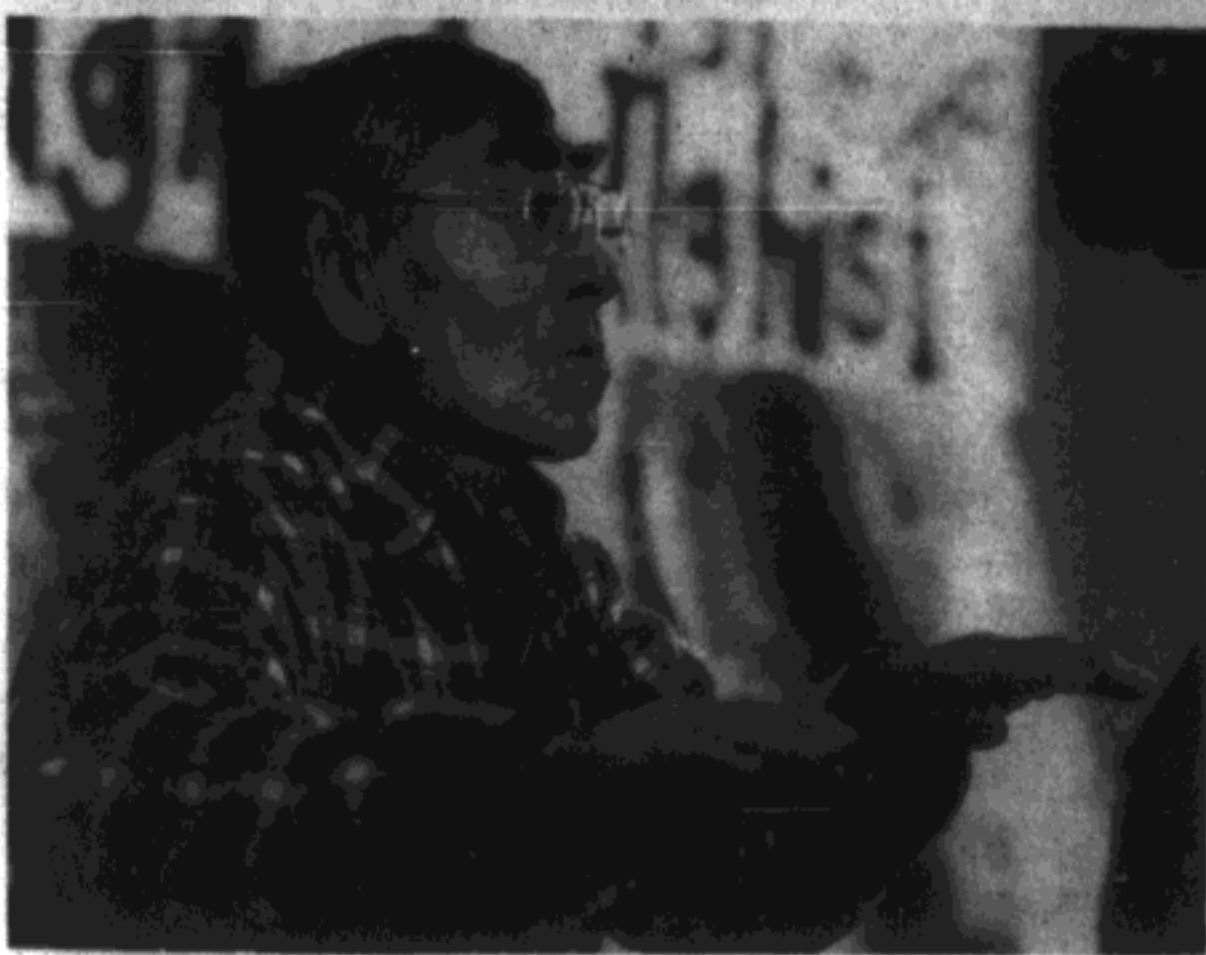
When Tiulana began beating a box drum suspended from the high ceiling of the armory the dancers swayed rhythmically in time to the beat. The men wore headpieces of eagle feathers and gauntlets to which pieces of ivory had been sewn. The women wore long, heavy fur parkas suitable for the cold but not the heat in the armory.

Four of the men slipped through the holes and while

inside the box took off the eagle feathers and put on the wolf masks. They stuck the wolf masks out of the holes and swayed with the drumbeat. But when they emerged again they had on their original costumes.

As the story is told, "A hunter goes out to shoot an eagle but before he can, the eagle raises his hood to reveal that he is a man. The eagle tells the hunter to climb on his back and they fly to a different place.

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Frank Ellana, a King Island elder and principal teacher of the Wolf Dance, gives final instructions on the dance.



King Island dancers watch as Ellana demonstrates the dance that was last performed in entirety in 1931.

Photos by Sabra McCracken

## Wolf Dance unites young, old with past

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"When the eagle lands he tells the hunter to listen to a beating sound. The sound is the heartbeat of his mother,"

Tiulana explained.

Much about the history of the Wolf Dance has been forgotten. The dance apparently was part of an elaborate celebration called the Messenger

Feast. It was performed differently in each village and marked special occasions. It may also have been a time when acting out one's aggressions was allowed when other-

wise, in daily life, inter-personal aggression was prohibited.

Most of the people who remember seeing the dance or participating in it were very young when it was performed more regularly. "Many of us have moved to the city to find jobs. City life is different and people live further apart. We don't get together as often. But city life isn't enough. We need our culture too," Tiulana said.

Tiulana himself made the move to Anchorage 14 years ago. In 1966 or 1967 the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided to close down King Island because, as Dr. Michael Krauss, director of the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks said, "the falling rocks on the island were deemed dangerous to the safety of the BIA teachers."

The entire King Island community of some 200 people was moved to East Nome. The 1974 flood wiped out that community and the King Islanders had to move again

to a location closer to Nome.

While working as a program coordinator of Eskimo culture in Anchorage Tiulana attended a dance symposium and met the visiting director of Folklore, Inc. He assembled his small band of King Island Dancers to perform for her.

"She was so impressed with the group that she encouraged me to apply for a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. That was three years ago and last year we got the grant," he said.

Three months ago Tiulana moved back to Nome to prepare the dancers and accessories for the Wolf Dance. The preparations took place in the King Island Hall in Nome.

Another King Island elder, Frank Ellana, was the principal dance instructor. Other main dancers in the King Island group were Jochim Koyuk, Francis Alvanna, Henry Koyuk, Mike Saclaman, Earl Mayac, John Penatac, Paul Omaik and Bernard Katexac.



Paul Tiulana, principal director of the King Island Dancers, leads the performance



Teresa Kunuk from King Island watches the moves of the King Island dancers as she holds one of the many lollipops tossed to the crowd by the dancers.