

Old, times remembered at Edgecumbe reunion

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times Staff

Inside the dorm, a group of young female residents from Yuk'ik-speaking Southwest Alaska hurry energetically

by three older women who once called these dorms home. "Have you seen your S.P. yet?" one of the more aged asks her friends.

"No," one answers.

"I seen mine!" the other states with youth-like excitement. "Across In Sitka!" At Mount Edgecumbe High School, S.P. was the term students of classes past once used

to describe "Special Persons." Like these women, virtually all of the hundreds of past students who gathered at Mount Edgecumbe High School last week hoped to

meet with old schoolmates and past friends.

In all, some 375 alumni registered between Saturday and Tuesday, and others came but did not register. Some stayed for three to four days, while others stopped for just a few hours, then headed to far-off places to take care of important business. Organizers had originally hoped for 600 participants, but with weather forcing over-booked flights to bypass Sitka, and a broken ferry, which further hampered arrivals, they felt the turnout to be very successful.

This all-class reunion was the first in the school's history. It probably never would have taken place were it not for the fact the federal government is planning to close Edgecumbe at the end of the 1982-83 school year. Frank O. Williams, Carolyn Moses Martin, Ed Mercer and Evelyn Ramos, all key figures in planning the reunion and spreading word of it about the state, all said the planned closure was the spark which set them to work and which prompted past students from as far away as Barrow, St. George and Lower 48 locations to gather together once again.

In past years, Mount Edgecumbe was known not only state-wide but nationally for its competition-winning choir.

Santa Fe, New Mexico is a long way from Sitka, Alaska, but past choir director Michael Ossorgin, Father Ossorgin to his former pupils, came from there to resurrect the famed choir once more. As the choir met for its first day of practice, it did not sound perfect, but it would have been hard for the untrained ear to detect this. Father Ossorgin could. "In other words," he stressed a point to his students as he attempted to highlight the ending of a Tlingit-inspired song, "As I told you 33 years

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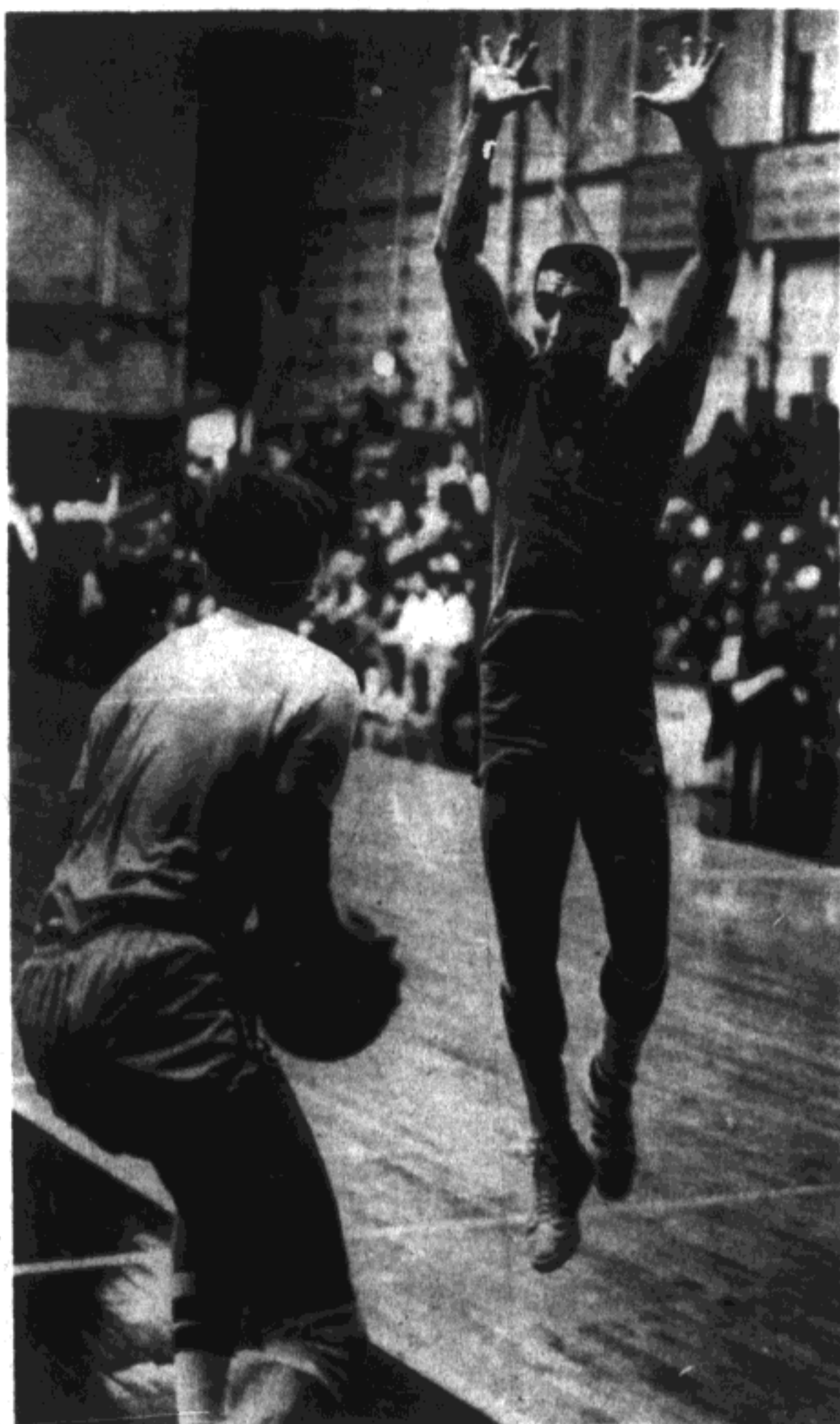
Many alumni said the high point of the reunion came when the old choir got together. Michael Ossorgin (inset) traveled from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to lead students whom he had taught over 30 years ago.

PHOTOS BY Bill Hess





Many of the alumni who came from statewide points to participate in the Mount Edgecumbe reunion gather for a group portrait.



Mount Edgecumbe has produced many champions and championship teams. Here, an alumni ball player blocks the advance of the Edgecumbe staff in a game which Alumni won, 91-80.



"Knock-kneed, bow-legged, pigeon-toed, fat" — that's how the yell went, but the alumni cheerleaders looked pretty good anyway.

"We are Family" theme of Edgecumbe reunion

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ago . . ."

When the choir sang two evenings later to a packed crowd of both alumni and students, even the critical ear of Father Ossorgin was pleased. When the music ended, there were tears in the eyes of both participants and spectators. Many say Father Ossorgin's choir was the highlight of the entire reunion, and in fact they came just because this man did.

Not only choir members gathered to display past talents. There were cheerleaders who sang about being "knock-kneed, fat, and pigeon toed," but who in reality look trim and sharp, despite the years. There were basketball players, including past hall of famers. They have retained enough of their endurance, agility and skill to squeak past and then destroy the current Mount Edgecumbe faculty when they meet in battle, but youth reigns supreme when they face the current Edgecumbe varsity. They are defeated.

For everybody, there were

enjoyable times in just meeting and chatting with old friends, and sharing a drink or a dance. As the reunion ends, a group of alumni come up with a resolution, calling for the school to remain open.

If any of the returning alumni felt the school should close down, they did not let their voices be heard. "We Are Family" was the theme for the reunion, and virtually all of the past students agreed with it, and expressed their feelings that the family of Mount Edgecumbe should be allowed to grow and not be cut off as part of President Reagan's budget cutting.

"All they would have to do," stressed Auggie Anderson of the class of '49 and the first male cheerleader at Mount Edgecumbe, "is scrap one of these jet-fighters that they land on aircraft carriers, and they could run Mt. Edgecumbe for 10 years! I don't think it makes much sense to build things to kill people, and then to scrap education!"

There are many in Alaska

who do want to see Mount Edgecumbe close down. Some rural educators note that Rural Education Attendance Areas were established to bring education to the Bush, and that many schools have been built in rural Alaska. Whenever a student leaves the Bush to attend schools elsewhere, there is less money for the rural school district.

Yet the overwhelming sentiment among the gathered Edgecumbe alumni was that Alaska is many years away from being to the point where an alternative school such as Mount Edgecumbe is no longer needed, and that if the school were to close down, the education of Alaska Natives would be hurt tremendously.

Robert Mullock of Kotzebue, class of '69, is an educator in the Northwest Arctic School District where many innovative educational programs are being conducted, and where the local population is having a strong influence on what is taught their children, including traditional culture and language, yet he

feels the school should remain open.

"A lot of people criticize it," Mullock says of his old school, "but look, most of our leaders have come from here. It was a place where I learned discipline. Sure, you go away from home for four years, and some say you will lose your culture. No one's going to lose their culture by going to an institution for four years. Let's keep Mount Edgecumbe open! It's time we tell the government we can control what we want to do from now on!"

Among the alumni who returned is Al Adams, state representative from Kotzebue, and chairman of the powerful Alaska House Finance Committee. Adams credited his experience at Edgecumbe with being responsible for much of the success he has had to date. Wherever he travels in Alaska, Adams notes, he finds old school mates. Thanks to Edgecumbe, Adams says he had a good statewide picture even

before he left high school.

Even if the federal government fails to come through on Edgecumbe, a default which many alumni feel would be a violation of the federal trust responsibility toward Native Alaskans, Adams hopes to keep the school open through state action, he said. Adams is responsible for legislation which calls for state funds, currently \$2.8 million to be used along with federal funds to keep the school operating.

Although Adam's finance committee is calling for cuts in the state budget, many of them controversial, he has no qualms about calling for funds for Edgecumbe. "There are many cutbacks needed in the state bureaucracy," Adams explains. "There are many programs which can be cut back. But we have our priorities for funding, such as education, health, law and order. This educational facility falls under our guidelines as something that is good for our Alaskan people."