

Native Folks Amazed—

Anthropologist Turns Tables, Studies Whites in Villages

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They're used to anthropologists up in the Kobuk River region. They're a dime a dozen in the summertime. But no one ever recalls one like Frank Keim.

Keim arrived there this spring, before the rush.

"What's a white man like you doing around this town?" the white residents asked.

"Studying you, man!" came Keim's reply.

"They just couldn't fathom that. The Natives have been studied to death but they couldn't believe someone would study the white man."

The researcher is a former Canadian who has long called Alaska home. He graduated

from the University of Alaska, joined the Peace Corps, worked in South America and Mexico and then returned to run the Parent Child Center at Kotzebue.

Now he's working on his Master's in anthropology at the University of Alaska where he

also serves as residence counselor.

The idea of doing a thesis on whites in the Arctic came, he said, from Anore and Dorothy Jones, who are doing similar research, and from a project he worked on Christmas vacation

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Anthropologist . . .

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in Unalaska. He decided to find out what brings outsiders North, how they adjust and what the Natives think of them.

"Not taking research designs too seriously, I decided to make an adventure of it, too. Chose the Kobuk area because I'd been there and liked the region."

Keim signed on Steve Grupis, another residence counselor, to go with him and hired Jimmy Edwards of Allakaket to take them up the Alatna River with his power boat to a point where they could port over to the headwaters of the Kobuk.

"We walked in 35 miles with a 30-pound rubber raft which just gave out on us. Torn to shreds on the rocks. So we walked 10 miles below Walker Lake, built a raft out of 12 logs with a Boy Scout type hatchet, some parachute twine Jimmy Edwards had given us and some shoe laces."

They rafted easily through Upper Kobuk Canyon and intended to make portage around the lower canyon which, by all accounts is impassable water. At that point the scientific study almost went under.

Keim doesn't know whether he misread his map or the map was wrong but suddenly he and Grupis found themselves in the Lower Kobuk Canyon fighting for their lives.

They made most of the trip under water and ended up with their supplies lashed to the underside of the raft.

"When we got out on the other side it was nice and peaceful," Keim recalls. "We went ashore to rest a little and passed out. Shock. Every-so often I wake up in the morning with a not so pleasant flashback. My last thought as I went under was to hang on to the raft. It was wood. It had to float."

They rebuilt the raft, traveled 250 miles on spring flood waters fighting sweepers and rough current. Twelve miles by land and 50 miles by water from the first village a helicopter spotted them and gave them a lift.

So much for the adventure. Keim went on to research half a dozen river villages and his notes also make good reading.

Ambler has the largest number of whites.

"The people who are there are typical in every way, well traveled, well educated enclave. Some really talented people. Last year there were about 30 of them. They say they can't function as human beings outside and they won't. I don't blame them...respect their desire

"They're not a commune or a community really. The environment pulls them together... and the fact that they're white."

A major problem for some whites in the area is making a living. Keim discovered one

qualified teacher who had lived in Ambler two years and sought employment with the school there.

"But the state wants to send out a woman they feel is better qualified who has been living stateside."

Keim found several reasons why whites settle in the north despite weather and economic odds against them.

"The prevailing reason is to get away from the rat race, the pressures from outside. There's a very genetic desire for man to have a nitch in this wide world. And it's physically beautiful country...out of this world."

But the majority of the white men are losers, he maintains. They don't adapt to the country or accept its people and some end up bitter and unhappy.

He spoke of a man who lives in an Eskimo sod hut fitted out inside "just like WASP America." Of wives who won't stay in the country. Of an old trader with two bitter gripes; civilization and missionaries.

"God will take care of those missionaries," the trader told him grimly. And he wasn't talking about Heaven and angels.

He also met hearty, remarkable women who "dig the country and the life." Noted even the saddest of the lot pulled to with remarkable courage in time of emergency like the treat of forest fire.

Keim said that Natives were surprised that first to learn he was researching the whites instead of "measuring their skulls" which is their stereotype of anthropology.

"I let it slide. Don't push and finally they come out with an opinion or two about the interlopers."

Generally, he found, Natives and whites socialized freely. This was too seldom, however. Only some teacher couples seemed to have settled in exceptionally well.

The researcher, who began his trip in May and returned last week, has yet to polish his notes and begin his thesis. He has developed, however, a fairly solid theory on how whites best survive the Arctic.

"In order to live in that kind of environment the white man has to become more like the Eskimo and the Indian, yet remain in the modern world. He really can't do anything else. The better the balance he can have between the two worlds, the better he is able to influence Eskimo people in modern ways."

The trip caused Keim to carefully reassess the value of anthropology, and he's not quite sure wherein his future lies.

"I've thought a lot about going out to the Kobuk myself," he smiled. "I'd like to give it a try."