

St. George Islanders mark bicentennial, dedicate new harbor

by Jim Benedetto
Tundra Times editor

ST. GEORGE — The residents of this picturesque little town in the Pribilof Islands continued their celebration of the bicentennial of the island's discovery with *baidar* (a skin-covered boat) races, games, tours of the island to visiting dignitaries, and by dedicating the nearly completed harbor which residents hope will bring economic prosperity to the island.

The island was discovered 200 years ago by the Russian fur trader Prybilov, for whom the islands are named. Prybilov had futilely sought the legendary breeding grounds of the much-valued fur seals for years before

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St. George Mayor Max Malavansky looks toward the island's future with 5-year-old son Victor. photo by Norris Klesman

St. George celebrates bicentennial, dedicates new harbor

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locating St. George.

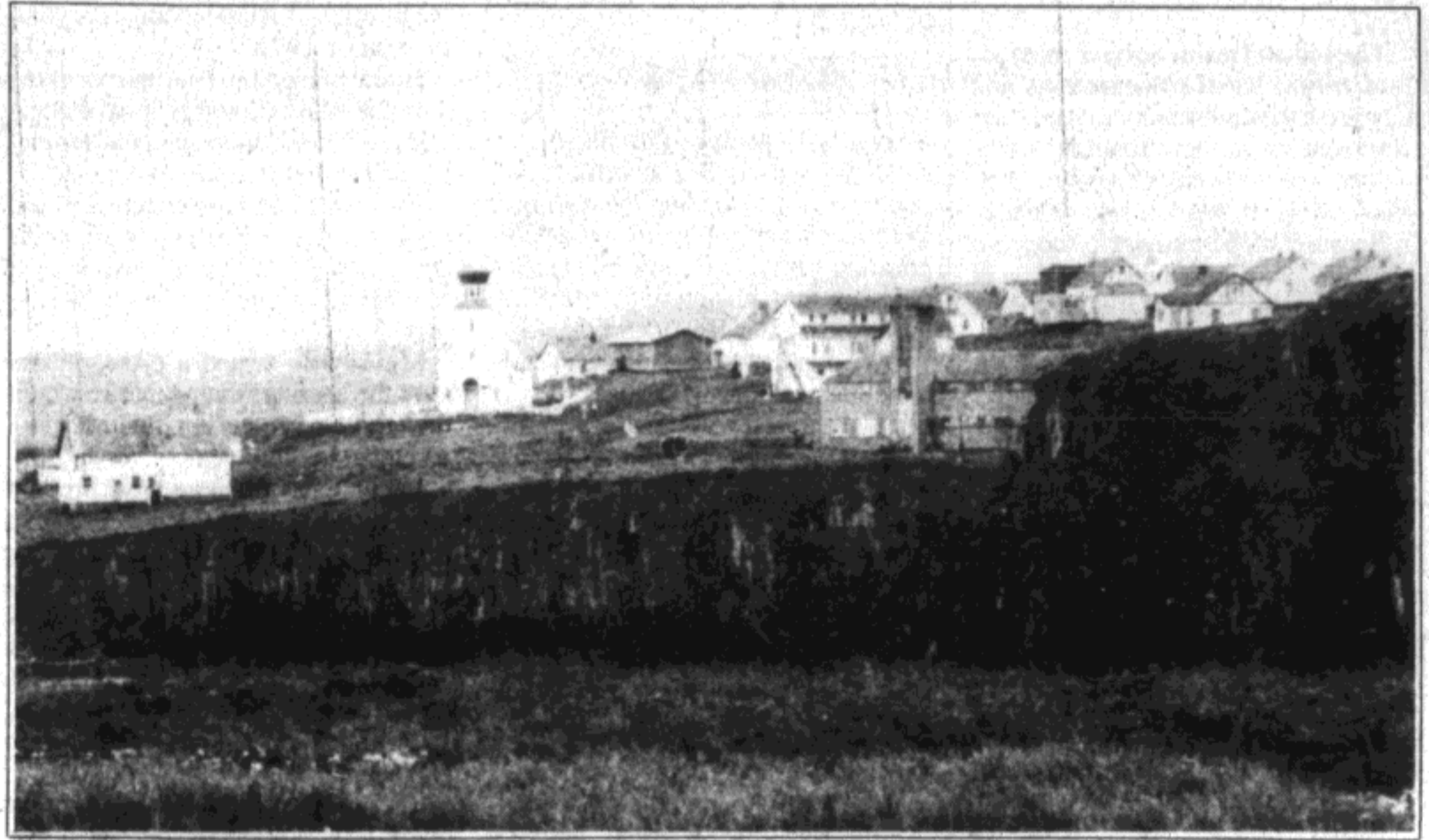
Quite a number of residents turned out to meet visitors arriving on the Air National Guard C-130 Hercules, said to be among the largest planes ever to land on the island. Local residents transported their guests the short distance to the town's hotel, where Mayor Max Malavansky officially welcomed them to the island.

Malavansky said the new harbor, about two-thirds complete, would spur the Americanization of the island and the local fisheries. Malavansky said that of the billions of pounds of fish taken annually within 200 miles of St. George, only a very minute portion was not taken by foreign vessels. St. George residents only want a fair share of that resource, Malavansky said.

The new harbor will also house a processing and storage plant and boat repair facility, to be completed in the next few years.

Visitors were given tours of the North Rookery of the island, where they had a chance to observe and photograph the thousands of fur seals congregating on the rocky beach below them.

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The village of St. George.

photo by Norris Klesman

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Some of the island's more colorful residents, the horned and tufted puffins, were also evident in great numbers, to the great delight of many of the visitors.

On hand for the dedication of the new harbor were members of several military color guards, representatives from Sens. Ted Stevens and Frank Murkowski's offices, Commissioner of Transportation Dick Knapp for Gov. Bill Sheffield, and Father Paul Mercurief of the Russian Orthodox Church. A plaque commemorating the occasion was presented by Mayor Malavansky to the people of St. George.

The Aleut people of St. George have resided on the island for nearly 200 years. They were enslaved and brought to the island by the Russians, who forced them to hunt the fur seals for their valuable pelts.

When the United States purchased Alaska in 1867, the government of the United States took the place of the Russians. The fur seal hunt continued at the behest of the United States government, which purchased the pelts from island residents for sale on the open market, and later for distribution to the other signatories of the North Pacific Fur Seal Treaty: Canada, the Soviet Union and Japan.

Recent efforts by animal rights groups, who have lobbied Congress to forbid the annual harvest, have resulted in a complicated mass of regulatory safeguards. Re-ratification of the North Pacific Fur Seal Treaty, which is necessary to deter commercial sealing nations from pelagic, or high seas, sealing, is being held up by those same animal rights groups, who oppose the use of the seal pelts for any commercial purpose.

The annual fur seal harvest is still

one of the major economic factors in the islands, and the fur seal itself remains the most important subsistence resource for the islands' residents.

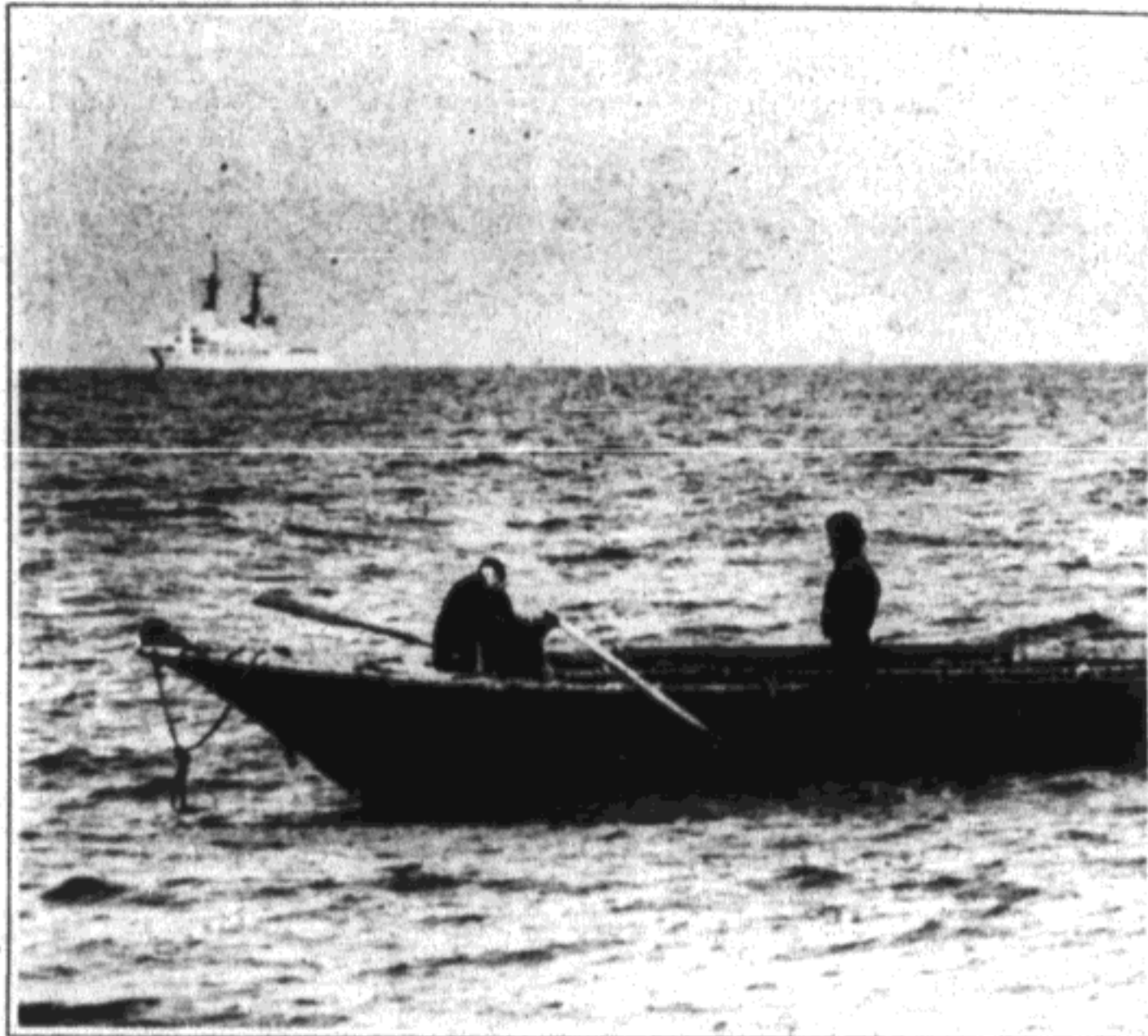
Media campaigns paid for by organizations such as Greenpeace International have sought to portray Aleut sealers as the brutal killers of snow-white pelted "baby seals." In fact, those seals are a different species — the harp seal — which occurs in Northeastern Canada.

The seals harvested by the Aleuts of the Pribilofs are three-to-five year old sub-adult males, which often weigh 300 pounds or more.

Established wildlife organizations such as the National Audubon Society have endorsed the Fur Seal Treaty.



Tufted and horned puffins are some of the island's more spectacular residents.
photo by Jim Benedetto



Baidar (skin boat) with the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Midgett standing offshore.

photo by Norris Klesman