

'I may not agree with what you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it'—VOLTAIRE

## Congratulations to the people of St. George

The people of St. George Island deserve to be recognized and congratulated for their ongoing efforts to build a new economy for their tiny island in the Bering Sea.

These people, as well as those on their sister island of St. Paul, have faced many hardships in the last 200 years. Shortly after St. George's discovery by a Russian navigator, many of the Aleuts of the Aleutian Islands were virtually enslaved by the Russians to carry out the fur seal harvest on the rich Pribilof Islands.

It was one foggy day in June 1786 that Gavriil Pribylov found St. George and the long-sought rookeries of the valuable fur seals. St. George islanders chose August to celebrate their bicentennial, and for 10 days their isolated island home, just 12 miles long, has been the scene of many festivities.

One of the most important things done during this time was the blessing of St. George's new harbor by his Beatitude Theodosius, metropolitan of the Orthodox Church of North America. Islanders view this new facility as part of a way for the community that now consists of fewer than 200 people to achieve its economic independence.

The harbor will accommodate the island's own fishing fleet for a growing halibut, pollock and hair crab industry as well as provide a place of refuge for other ships engaged in the North Pacific fisheries.

Although the islanders deserve most of the credit for making this harbor a reality, the state of Alaska also should be recognized for its financial commitment of millions of dollars to build it. It is only through continued efforts to develop industry on the islands themselves that the people will be able to continue living on their wind and storm swept home.

St. George islanders have faced incredible difficulties ever since their home's discovery by the Russians. And their lot improved little after the purchase of Alaska by the United States. The people continued as little more than indentured servants, harvesting the fur seals each year right up until World War II when they were dragged from their home and put in camps in Southeastern Alaska.

The survivors of that fiasco — many of the islanders died as a result of their treatment in the camps — went home only to find that soldiers had vandalized their homes and taken many of their belongings.

Even more recently the islanders have had to contend with overzealous conservationists who finally made the fur seal harvest economically unfeasible, in effect shutting down virtually the only industry on the island.

And yet the people's spirit prevails even to this day as they prepare for the future by developing a harbor. We can only hope that they are successful in this endeavor and that their sister island of St. Paul is able to move in the same direction as it observes its own bicentennial of discovery in 1987.