



*Dancers in Novoyé Chaplino in the Soviet Union celebrate the visit of Alaska Natives from Gambell last summer*

# Project bridges the Bering Straits

**by Jennifer Gordon**  
Tundra Times reporter

For more than 40 years, the people of Gambell on St. Lawrence Island could only look at the mountains of the Soviet Far East, 38 miles away.

This summer as many as six Alaska Natives may be able to visit the Chukotka Peninsula in the U.S.S.R. for as long as a year and a half. The trip is part of the "Bridging the Bering Straits Project" of the Pacific Traditions Society, directed by Drs.

Mimi George and David Lewis.

George, an anthropologist, and Lewis, a physician, author and explorer, have studied cultures around the world and plan to study and compare the traditions of Soviet and Alaska Natives and how they live in Arctic conditions. Many Natives in Alaska's far Northwest lost touch with relatives and friends in the Soviet Far East when the borders between the U.S.S.R. and the United States closed in 1948.

There have been major changes in the Soviet Union in recent years. *Perestroika*, a radical re-structuring of the society with a movement toward democracy, and *glasnost*, meaning "openness," have led to exchanges of information between the Soviet Union and United States. Because of these changes, Alaska Natives have been able to make short visits to certain villages on the Soviet coast.

(Continued on Page Seven)

# • Project aims to bridge Bering Straits

(Continued from Page One)

Last June Alaska Natives visited Provideniya on "Friendship Flight One."

In August, 11 Gambell residents got the chance to cross the border and visit relatives and friends in Provideniya and Novoye Chaplino for six days. This was the first phase of the "Bridging the Bering Straits Project." George said they had planned to do much more, but inclement weather kept them from traveling to other villages when they returned to Alaska.

George and Lewis, said they have received invitations from Soviet officials to visit the Eskimo settlements along the Bering Sea and Arctic coasts.

In June the sailboat *Vixen* will cross into Soviet waters and dock in the towns of Provideniya, Novoye Chaplino, AnMelen, Nunlygren,

Loyino, Lavrentiya, Nanyamo, Uelen, Inchoun, Enurmina, Uenkarem, Neshkcin, Billings and Peveka.

George and Lewis hope to raise about \$15,000 to cover the costs of renovating the sailboat. The total cost of the trip is more than \$125,000. George said the only obstacle at this time is funds.

George said the exchange of information between the Alaska and Soviet Natives will help her and her husband learn more about traditional healing, travel and the meanings of dances and songs.

During the winter the *Vixen* will be frozen into the water at one of the major villages. The visitors will travel by dog sled to various towns. Lewis said that because of the shortage of housing in the villages, they will have to live on the boat during the winter.

George and Lewis said that they

hope that their communication between the Soviet Union and Alaska will make it easier for Natives to travel between the two countries in their own boats.

Soviet Natives and Alaska Natives have similar problems with alcohol and depression, George said. On their first trip, she said they noticed that there is a movement in the Soviet North to bring back traditional values to combat these problems, similar to the sobriety movement in Alaska.

Lewis said in some ways, the Soviet government has been more understanding of the Native peoples' problems and has set up seminars for traditional healers.

The Native people of the Soviet Union have reacted strongly to *perestroika*, George said, and Soviet anthropologists are beginning to agree that the Natives should develop their

old culture.

The ability to travel safely on the ice is another subject George and Lewis will be studying from Natives of both countries. The two scientists have traveled several times to Antarctica, producing a number of articles for *National Geographic Magazine*. During one trip they purposefully froze their ship into the ice for 11 months while studying the land.

Lewis said that their studies of Antarctica led them to studies of people in the Arctic, to see how different cultures live off the land.

Last year, Lewis received a citation from Gov. Steve Cowper, for "Outstanding Service to the People of Alaska." Both Lewis and George said they hope these trips lead to a greater understanding that reaches beyond the Native peoples, to the people of the Soviet Union and the United States.