

Letters to the Tundra Times

'Good Example Of Bad Book'

Editor:

The genre of misrepresentation is unfortunately well represented in literature about Alaska.

The excerpt from *Going to Extremes* by Joe McGinnis published in *We Alaskans* Saturday (Sept. 20, 1980) is an extremely good example of a bad book. It is ignorant at best and racist at worst, and is, alas, an excellent example of inaccurate and superficial views of Alaskan life by an insensitive outside observer. We can see by specific examples that McGinnis has no idea what he is writing about.

1. First, his use of the word "Slavic" is unfortunate and misleading. The word has nothing to do with the English adjective denoting Russians and other Slavs. McGinnis is mis-hearing and misunderstanding a Yupik Eskimo word "Slaavi" or "Slaaviq." The "q" is a Yupik noun ending and is not found in the English sound system. The word derives from the Russian and Slavonic word for "glory" and is taken from the opening line of the New Testament Christmas greeting "Glory to God in the Highest."

2. There is not a single word in the excerpt to indicate that the so-called "Slavic Festival" is actually the Christmas carolling that is part of Russian Orthodox

Christmas as celebrated throughout Alaska. McGinnis does not seem to be aware that he is observing Christmas.

3. A word such as "Slaavi" or "Slaaviq" is used in most Alaska Native Languages to describe the custom known in English as "starring" or "carolling." The "prayer wheel" mentioned by McGinnis is actually a star which is carried from house to house and spun on a hand held axle while the songs are being sung. The tradition symbolizes and re-enacts the journey of the Magi following the Star of Bethlehem. One of

the "ancient Russian hymns" vaguely mentioned by McGinnis is the Christmas Tropar or Hymn, one line of which goes "those who worshipped the stars were taught by a star to adore Thee, the Sun of Righteousness." The hymn is indeed ancient, and dates probably from the fifth century, when the Church separated the celebration of the Nativity of Christ from the Epiphany, and set the date of Christmas as December 25 to combat Pagan sun worship. Another hymn McGinnis was hearing was the "Glory to God in the highest" from Luke's Gospel, and from which the name of the starring custom derives.

Starring is an old folk custom of some-but not all-Slavic people. It was introduced into Alaska some 200 years ago, and continues among the Orthodox in Alaska and in some but not all Orthodox ethnic

groups elsewhere in the US and Canada (as well as the Old World.) Choice of songs varies according to community taste. In Anchorage we sing "Silent Night" and other Western Christmas songs in addition to the traditional Eastern Orthodox hymns and carols.

4. McGinnis is in the midst of Russian Orthodox Christmas, yet the only reference to Christmas is a quote from a disgruntled villager that "this goddam Slavic ruins everything. You can't even watch real Christmas on TV."

5. A minor point: the "village leaders waving incense" are probably the clergy -- a priest or deacon. This, if in fact correctly observed by McGinnis, may be a local custom, as incense is not carried in some other communities during starring. Another minor, but typical point: McGinnis is upset by the "orgy of sugar." I can't comment on this, other than to remember my childhood Christmases in New York and my delight at ribbon candy, candy cane, stockings full of gum and candy etc. Enough said.

As a writer, McGinnis has certainly avoided the potentially saccharine "Christmas Customs Around the World" approach. I suspect he goes to the extreme opposite point of view not by choice, but out of ignorance.

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Anchorage, Alaska

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Letters to the Tundra Times

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Dear Editor,

This letter is in response to the letter from Harry John in your Jan. 7th issue. I have the following questions for him.

1. How would you feel if someone said, "All those brown people are trying to take over the world."

2. Do you realize the dif-

ference between a school and a jail?

3. Aren't we part of "Western Civilization?"

4. How has it brought death and destruction to the earth?

5. How many people go to the states as prisoners?

6. What are "modes" of

Western Civilization?

7. Are the Federal Penitentiaries "theirs" or ours?

8. Who pays for them?

9. If "Capitalism" is so bad, why don't you move to the Soviet Union and try out the prisons there?

I find trains of thought in Mr. John's reasoning similar to

that of Hitler. His presentation was idealistic, racially biased, and inconsistent. He takes for granted many of the freedoms we enjoy as Americans. Although our Democracy is not perfect, in this country each individual controls his own destiny to a far greater extent than almost any other nation in

the world. Let's keep it that way.

Sincerely Yours,
Tim Schverch

P.S. I am for an Alaskan jail system.

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