

Fratis: The new port is real good for St. Paul

by Soren Wuerth
for The Tundra Times

ST. PAUL — Inside St. Paul's century-old Russian Orthodox church assistant ward Paul Fratis hurriedly finished his chores. The new harbor was being dedicated, and Fratis wanted to be there for the celebration.

"The new port is real good for St. Paul," Fratis said. "That's why it is going to be blessed. It's our only hope because without it I don't know what we would do for income. The federal government wanted us all to become game wardens."

For the nearly 600 Aleuts living on St. Paul, the \$58 million boat harbor means potential economic self-sufficiency. After years of relying on federal and state grants, this remote island may be on its way to becoming a major player in the Bering Sea fishing industry.

"We've invested more than \$200 million in St. Paul, all in the name of financial independence," said Ron Philemonoff, the chairman of Tanadgusix Corp., the island's Native corporation.

Independence is something the Aleuts living on the islands of St. Paul and St. George are not accustomed to.

The Aleuts were imported to the Pribilofs soon after Russian explorer Gerassium Pribylov discovered St. George Island in 1786 and were forced to work hunting fur seals and manufacturing their pelts.

After the United States bought Alaska, the Pribilofs were made into a federal reservation and the seals became a resource to be developed. During this time the United States took total control over the lives of the Aleuts, forcing them to work under miserable working conditions.

During World War II, the Aleuts were evacuated off the islands for six years. In the '60s and '70s, the fur seal industry failed to produce revenue and the labor force of the two island communities declined, dropping residents below the poverty level.

When commercial seal harvests were banned in 1984, St. Paul and St. George were forced to rely on state and federal grants and income generated from tourists and occasional fishing crews that anchored offshore.