

The Pribilovians : Free at Last

FROM THE ALL-ALASKA WEEKLY

When the Russians made their conquest of Alaska, one of the first things they did was to enslave the Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands. Unable to catch sea otters themselves, the Russian hunters enslaved the Aleut hunters and forced them to leave their families and accompany them from island to island through the chain, to Prince William Sound and beyond, never to return again.

In a 20-year period, the Aleut population of about 16,000 was reduced to about 2,000.

The Russians put a governor on St Paul, the larger of the islands, and the governor ruled with an iron hand. The Aleuts were given Russian names and there was interbreeding. Churches were established and there were some attempts at providing education. But by and large, the Russians kept the Aleuts in bondage and exploited them.

When the Russians sold Alaska to the U.S., there was a provision in the purchase agreement that all civilized tribes (Christianized) were to be assured the land and property they owned at the time. But unfortunately when the U.S. took possession of Alaska they overlooked this provision because they turned the Pribilofs into Special Game Reservations denying any property rights to the people. The U.S. then began a long period in which it kept the Pribilovians in bondage and exploiting them as did the Russians.

Even in 1965 when we went to the Pribilofs covering a state investigation there we found at the highest point on the island was a luxurious building, a virtual palace, in which lived the director of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries Pribilof operations. And even at that late date, he was a virtual dictator who ruled with an iron hand. And the Pribilovians were still being exploited.

At 7 a.m. in the morning a loud siren would blow and men with lunch buckets in hand would scamper out of houses and jump aboard flatbed trucks parked in a row in the middle of the village. And about five or ten minutes later, the trucks would proceed across the level wind-swept island to the seal rookeries. About 5:30 in the evening the men would return. They were paid so low in wages that they could scarcely ever get ahead and continuously owed the village store, operated by the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, money for groceries.

In 1951, the Pribilovians filed claims with the Indian Claims Commission. The claims were litigated very slowly but the Pribilovians pursued them with renewed vigor in the mid-sixties when over a four-year period they fought to shake off the shackles of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries with the assistance of the weekly Indian-Eskimo-Aleut newspaper, *Tundra Times*. Much progress was made but early this month, the Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands won a major victory when the Indian Claims Commission awarded them more than \$11,000,000 against the U.S. government.

With the award, the Aleuts of the Pribilofs will be able to develop some industries to provide employment. They, no doubt, will be able to invest in such things as fishing boats and processing facilities. Perhaps at long last the Pribilovians will become free at last.