

Museum of the Arctic expands to display culture

By BILL HESS
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Wolf howls chill the air as a shaft of light falls upon two snow-white bighorn sheep high on an icy mountain cap.

A nearby peak is silhouetted by the red and blue hues of the northern lights. Below there are bears of all kinds; there are waterfowl, seals, lynx, the fierce wolverine and the woolly musk ox. Not far away Inupiat hunters are about to thrust a harpoon into the flesh of a beluga whale.

Alaska is famous for such sights, yet only a few of those who come here are fortunate enough to ever witness them; unless, perhaps, they visit the NANA Museum of the Arctic, located in Kotzebue.

The museum was conceived by Kotzebue Native John Schaeffer, who also happens to be a shareholder in and the president of the NANA Regional Corp.

Schaeffer envisioned more than a building housing a static display of artifacts. He saw a

museum which would help visitors understand the relationship between the Eskimo and the animals, land and the sea, their past, and their future.

The result of this dream is a combination of carefully orchestrated light and animal show, slide show, and traditional dancing, which local State congressman Al Adams, proudly proclaims be the best of its type in the state.

Visitors gather in the center of the museum's auditorium as a multitude of carefully placed spotlights backed up by a sound-track single out and illuminate the different animals and ecosystems of Alaska. They are then taken to another part of the building where they can witness jade from nearby Jade Mountain being processed and gradually transformed into works of Art. Following this, they are shown a computerized slide show describing life in the region, and finally Eskimo dancing, which they also are invited to participate in. Approximately 6,000 visitors have witnessed this show this summer since

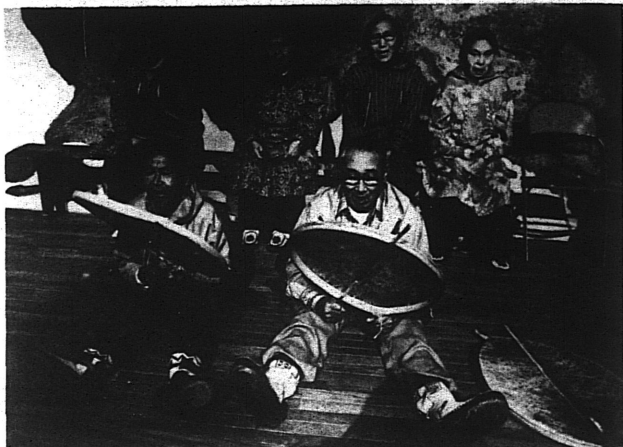


PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Members of an Eskimo dance troupe perform regularly at the Museum of the Arctic.

1976.

Pam Herman, the special assistant to Schaeffer, notes that

the tapes and computers which control the light displays and the slide show have an infinite number of capabilities.

She says that more of these will be used in the future, particularly for local use. For example, a slide show is now being prepared which will show scenes from all the 11 villages within the NANA region. There will be no dialogue with this, but its intended audience, NANA shareholders, will know what is going on and should be able to relate to it.

NANA also plans to transfer the operation of the museum to a new, non-profit corporation, which it is forming. "A museum is really an educational, rather than a profit-making institution," Herman explains. "The non-profit status of the museum will enable it to seek funds for additional programming outside of NANA."

The Museum directors hope to create programs which can be shown not only in Kotzebue, but in Natural history museums outside Alaska. Herman recently toured some of these museums and found their exhibits dealing with Eskimos to be "obsolete." It is amazing how little is known about the people here, even though they have been the most studied people in the world!" Herman muses.

Additionally, the museum hopes to develop additional programs dealing with subjects such as bilingualism, now being actively promoted in regional schools, information on the land claims, and other presentations with local service. Many of these could be shared throughout the region, even with those who are unable to get into Kotzebue.

The museum already has the

necessary facilities for radio broadcasts, and the school district is setting up an instructional TV program which will also be able to use the facilities.

The program information is recorded on tapes which the computer translates into what viewers actually see. Once it is set up, it is simple to operate. "You just punch a button," Herman notes. All the lighting, technical, and artistic elements currently showing in the museum have been directed and supervised by William E. Duncan, a media "wizard" out of Seattle. William Berry, a former Californian but now long time Alaska resident, is the art and exhibit designer. Berry has also conceived and designed many of the displays in Disneyland.

The dancers and singers are all local people, most senior citizens. Basically, there are four drummers and six dancers, but this may vary slightly from day to day. Any of the elders in the community are welcome to come in and participate, for hire. The dancing goes on seven days a week, twice a day. Herman explains that when a performer hits a point where they feel they must have a day off, they take one. This has never caused any problems, she says, as they take these breaks individually. There have always been enough dancers.

Herman believes there always will be plenty of skilled Inupiat dancers to perform. "It was very evident at last year's trade fair that people of all ages do like to dance," she explains. "Also, there is a group of very good Inupiat dancers at the high school. The younger people are interested in dancing."

At this point in time, the NANA Museum of the Arctic appears to have a good future.