

ALASKA'S DYING VILLAGES - KING ISLAND, DIOMEDE ISLAND

KING ISLAND VILLAGE—Perched on a steep hillside on King Island's rocky coast, the old King Island village is now almost deserted. Disease and rock-slides from cliffs towering over the tiny community forced a move to Nome, where the villagers now live in squalor and poverty.

MAC'S PHOTO



- Diomed Island -



The tragic King Island story may yet have a happy ending.

But at another island village a few miles west the same story is unfolding.

The village is Little Diomed Island, three miles east of Big Diomed and the watching eyes of Russian sentries.

The change there isn't as dramatic nor as total as the King Island move.

There are no falling boulders or plagues of sickness, and the BIA school is still full of learning youngsters.

The elements of the same

economic pattern, however, are becoming apparent.

Population Dwindles

Diomed once boasted a population in the hundreds. Now there are about 70 people there.

At first, men began leaving to work at laboring jobs, on the Alaska mainland during the summers. Some of them began taking their families with them for the season.

And then, one by one, the families started staying on the mainland and only visiting the island community occasionally.

(Continued on Page 6)

CARVING AMID POVERTY—

Above (right), and below (left), King Island people now make a slim living from occasional employment and ivory carving, a skilled trade. The prices paid for carvings are not really equal to the long hours of labor put into each carving. Housing in the new "King Island Village," built on an old garbage dump near Nome, leaves much to be desired. Ten people live in the 10 x 15-ft. shack pictured below.

Tundra Times Photos



Diomed Island . . .

(Continued from Page 4)

Last year the village's population showed an increase, possibly because of a new medical clinic established on the island by non-denominational missionary Rev. James Flynn.

There were 90 people staying on the island last winter. Some older Diomeders who had planned a move to Nome to be nearer medical care changed their minds when the clinic was built.

Not Used

Despite the clinic being set up and stocked with some medical supplies last summer, it was not used at all this year.

Rev. Flynn was still "outside" and there was no one to operate the clinic.

The only medical help on the island were two Public Health Service medical aides—Davis Menadelook and Alvin Kayoukuk.

Using a limited stock of medicines at the BIA school there, these two men did an admirable job of keeping the village healthy last winter.

Isolated

The crises that prompted the King Island move—sickness, falling rocks and lack of school facilities—are not present at Little Diomed, but many conditions are the same.

Little Diomed is just as isolated as King Island. There is no airstrip and planes flying from the mainland must either land on ice or on water.

This limits the times planes can visit the island to just a few months out of a year.

Winter ice is usually strong enough to support the weight of an airplane in late January, but rarely before. The ice becomes unsafe for ski landings in May, generally.

Float-landings during the summers are tricky and unpredictable, with the stormy weather changing hourly. Flights to the island during summer months are generally sporadic.

By Water

Transportation to the mainland is by skin boat during open-water times of the year.

The trip from Diomed to Wales, on the tip of the Seward Peninsula, usually takes 2½ to 3 hours.

During summers and falls, mail for the Diomedes is usually stored at Wales and brought out to the island when someone makes a skin-boat trip.

Diomed boatmen, tough and used to the worst of Bering Strait storms, can usually make trips back and forth until October. After that, winter storms howling down out of the north make the seas too rough.

The few ships that visit Diomed can come much later. Last year the North Star, the BIA's re-supply freighter, anchored off Little Diomed in late October.

The last ship for the year was the icebreaker Staten Island which visited Oct. 24.

During the considerable periods of time between when planes can land at the island and skin boats can be used, the Little Diomeders have no way to reach the mainland.

They are just as isolated as if they were on the moon.

Food Short

Last winter food ran short on Little Diomed. A call for help went out and several plane-loads of reindeer meat from the Teller area were flown in as well as fish from Kotzebue.

Joe Felder, well-known bush pilot in the area, did much of the flying.

Good Hunting

Despite the rigors of living in the middle of the storm-battered Bering Straits, life at Diomed can be pretty good at certain times of the year.

Walrus and other sea animals are plentiful.

Literally hundreds of walrus come through the narrow passage between Little and Big Diomed each spring, heading north, and in the fall they come back through going south.

Diomed hunters are waiting for them and the walrus provides an important part of the island's meat diet.

Birds and eggs during the summer are also plentiful. Auklets, murre, cormorants and other birds abound by the thousands on Little Diomed, nesting in rocky cliffs around the island.

When the villagers go egg-gathering they must actually climb up the cliffs to get to the nests.

Netting

Catching birds is done in a unique way on the island. Besides setting snares and traps near nests, villagers also catch birds with nets—a "butterfly-type net" about two feet across at the mouth and a 10-foot pole, usually.

The birds are caught by climbing high into the rocks,

hiding until a bird comes along, then simply netting him.

Winds on Diomed usually blow either north or south—and strong, at that. Birds will usually fly against the wind, thus reducing their speed and making them easy prey.

Diomeders can climb into the rocks for a couple of hours and net 20 to 30 birds.

Fairway Rock, a huge butterfly-type structure jutting from the sea between Diomed and the Alaska mainland, is a favorite place for egg-gathering during summer months.

Thousands of auklets nest in the cliffs rising from the sea and again, villagers must scale the cliffs to seek out the nests.

Russians

Three miles to the west, Russian sentries on Big Diomed Island keep a close eye on activities at the smaller island.

The Russians have built a big airfield on the larger island along with watching posts and a radar station on the east side.

All the Big Diomed Eskimos have apparently been moved off the island by the Russians. Little Diomeders say they have not seen their Russian counterparts, many of them relatives, out fishing or hunting for a long time.

Little Diomed's "defenses" consist of six to eight National Guardsmen, members of the "Eskimo Scouts" of the 1st Scout Battalion at Nome, Alaska.

The Scouts meet for drills in the village armory and under the supervision of NCOIC Sgt. Robert Soolook, practice battle tactics on the ice near the island with their weapons.