

Mountain Village hosts dance festival

by Patti Harper

for the Tundra Times

The CB's are busy in Mountain Village. "Hey, wait up, there's one more here needs a ride". And another plane is coming in. More than 100 visitors descend on the community in small groups, from villages around the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, whenever the fog clears enough to let a cessna land.

City officials and volunteers are busy searching lists of homes open to the visitors and shuttling the newcomers off in vehicles to get settled. There's a lot to do. Some are here for the dance festival, some are here for the Elders Conference, some are here for both. All will enjoy the evening of festivities. For several days, the Elders Conference

recesses at 5 p.m. and within a few hours the new community hall is packed with smiles and laughter and running children.

The village is proud of its new building, which opened in January. Volunteers keep the coffee pot and juice bucket full and set out cups and cookies. Everyone settles in for a fun evening of visiting and dancing. They've prepared to be up through the early morning hours.

The Alaska State Council On the Arts provided the money for the groups from Mountain Village, Toksook Bay, Tununak, and Stebbins to participate. The Emmonak group came on their own.

The drums and the songs begin. The dancers join in slowly at

first, then with bold sharp movements to the drums, illustrating the story of a journey, a hunt, or what happens when you eat the wrong thing.

Mountain Village has hosted this festival for several years. Though it's a lot of fun, they take their dancing seriously. Off and on since 1978 the local school district has hired dance leader Gregory Joe to teach Yupik dancing. Now, there's a spontaneous session in the village nearly every night. Gregory Joe says he insists that homework be done before the kids come to the dancing. He sees those involved in the sessions taking a more aggressive attitude toward learning in school. And they learn a lot at the dancing. "One thing they learn is Yupik language, because we emphasize speaking in Yupik" he says

through an interpreter. And, he says, they learn the Yupik way of life, both the how to's and values of subsistence hunting and fishing. "History repeats itself", he says. "I want to share what I learned from my elders with the young people of today".

City councilman Ed Beans thinks the dancing fosters better communication between the youth and the elders of the community - a communication which has been broken down under the pressure of a language barrier, and the fast-paced activities and changes in the lives of the village youth.

The dancing is for all ages, but it's the parents and grandparents who really cut loose. The performance is fluid - a member of the audience joins in, a dancer leaves

the mat, another comes onto it. Friends in the audience refuse to let a dancer rest until they've done the dance just one more time. Shouts of "cali", "again", yield pleading looks from the dancer and laughter from the audience. As the evening goes on dancers are urged to more and more hilarious expressions of the stories. They tease each other and tease the audience.

Some of the youngsters wander in and out - they're taking in the movies next door at the city offices then returning to the dancing. As they open the door the cold night air floats into the warm room like steam off of dry ice. Children of all ages, fascinated by the dancing practice moving to the rhythm from wherever they're sitting or standing. A bond between generations.