



Andrew Gronholdt is from Sand Point, which is celebrating its 100th birthday Aug. 15-23. He is holding a reproduction of an Aleut hat. See story page six.

Most don't want to live anywhere else

by Betzi Woodman

for the Tundra Times

You well might ask: "Why is Sand Point?"

The "what, where and how" are easy. But why do people live on a remote wind-raked, rain-slashed little island only nine miles long?

Not only do nearly 1,000 people live in this Shumagin Island community: they like it, and most don't want to live anywhere else.

Now Sand Point folks are preparing to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the city's beginning. And during the gala festivities Aug. 15-23, they will be looking back at happenings of their first 100 years. They also will look at the exotic history of the whole Shumagin Island region which has influenced the lives and culture of Aleut descendants who live there.

Which brings us to the what, where and how. Sand Point is a first class city (since 1978) on Popof Island, one of 15 sizable islands in the Shumagin group of Aleutian Islands. It is 571 air miles southwest of Anchorage and lies in the midst of a rich fishing area — salmon, cod and shellfish.

Sand Point did not begin as a "typical" Native Aleut settlement. In fact, if it were not for the fine harbor at the mouth of Humboldt Creek and establishment in 1887 by San Francisco entrepreneurs of a processing plant for cod fish, the city might well have risen on neighboring Unga Island.

There is evidence that Aleuts lived on Unga long before Outsiders came in the 1880s to harvest the bountiful cod banks whose fame had spread to the West Coast of the United States. A gold strike in 1886 on Unga, along with the cod fishing, brought people from many nearby communities such as Korovin, King Cove and Belkofski to seek employment.

Feisty Scandinavian men came from the dwindling cod industry in the North Atlantic to seek a living in the Shumagin area. Many of these men married Russian-Aleut women, some settling on Unga and others on Popof. The result is a happy amalgam of Russian-Aleut-Danish-Swedish-Norwegian and Finnish stock.

The population on Unga, which reached more than 300, began to drop off after 1920; and when a cold storage plant was built about 1946 in Sand Point, people moved across the strait, and Unga gradually became a ghost town.

The population continued to grow with most rapid increases in the last decade. Amenities such as electricity, water and sewer, satellite television and telephone give comfort to life in this remote city. A new school has a swimming pool and shop facilities. It is located on a hill where the Meadows subdivision is developing. Utilities,



Ralph Bjornstad



The Sand Point cemetery is on a small hill looking toward Unga Island across the two-mile strait and the mountains beyond on the mainland.

with all lines buried here and throughout the city, are in. Lots are acre-sized.

These and more could encourage residents to live at Sand Point. But one set of statistics shines forth in relation to the "why" of Sand Point. More than half the population has lived here 16 years or longer with 46 percent for 20 or more years. Why do they stay? Those questioned seldom mentioned the physical comforts. Read on.

Steve Hakala, station manager for Reeve Aleutian Airways and a hunting guide, says people stay not only for what Sand Point has to offer "but for the lack of negatives. . . Sand Point delivers less hassels, or at least a different variety from those in an urban area. This is not a place to escape to," he says, for Sand Point is fast becoming a real city.

"But it is growing positively, planned to avoid the problems of elsewhere; the tempo is slower, and the people are not so aggressively competitive."

Hakala came to Sand Point in 1964, liked it and stayed. He married a girl from Sanak. They raised their three children who all graduated from Sand Point High School. He particularly likes the "carnival atmosphere" of the fishing season. "It begins as people seem to come out of hibernation, the pace quickens and the full vigor of the people comes alive."

Diane Wilde knows what the beginning of fishing season is like. "The men are like the fish themselves returning to the streams — they get a gleam in their eyes, they love to put the nets in the water, always wondering 'is this one the big load?'"

She is part of the large Gunderson clan — "I think I am related to about 150 people here." Those Scandinavian fishermen usually had big families and as they stayed on, so did their children.

Although she thinks Sand Point is a good place to live, Wilde also believes it's good to try to live Outside, for another perspective, at least in another place from Sand Point. "You can be too sheltered here."

Her family, she says, is one-quarter Aleut, but she remembers that until the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act one never heard the term Native. "There was no such thing as Native or non-Native."

But no matter the terminology, the community is not conscious of differences in ethnic backgrounds. It only comes up when the proportion of Native blood must be established for

various legal purposes.

When Frances Johansen was asked about living elsewhere, she was surprised that anyone would even ask. "I would not think of moving. I'm used to a small place, I'm used to the people and I like them. There are no strangers here."

Like others in Sand Point, Johansen likes to get away for a month — Anchorage, Seattle, maybe even Reno or Lake Tahoe. "But we always come back. This is a fishing place, and I'm married to a fisherman."

She was born in 1919 in Kodiak, but came to Unga soon thereafter. Her mother was from Tin Point off Cold Bay and her father from Sweden. When work slackened off in Unga, her family came to Sand Point. Her family's house became the second one in town.

Now she keeps busy with her many plants — her African violets are exquisite — crocheting afghans and doing other handwork, enjoying friends.

Norma Newman is another long-time resident, born on Unga to an Aleut-Russian mother and a Norwegian father. She came to Sand Point in 1952 but the population had not yet reached 200. Recently, she retired after 19 years as a custodian at the school. Now she is planning her new life — some relaxing, then she'll go fishing with her husband.

She would not want to live elsewhere. "This place is small, not like cities which are too fast — go, go, go! This is home."

Newman is also a reader for the St. Nicholas Orthodox church in Sand Point, a position she had held for 15 years. With volunteers she is working to earn funds to repair the building erected in 1936 and now declared a state historical site. She hopes to have enough done by Centennial days to have Bishop Gregory from Sitka consecrate the refurbishing.

Inge Martinsen, owner of the Aleutian Commercial Co., the large store with the modern restaurant, The Ship's Anchor. He arrived in Seattle from Norway in 1955. Eight years later he and his bride of six months, Rita, came to Sand Point to work for the then Aleutian Cold Storage.

"We had to sign a two-year contract, but as newly-weds we wanted to save. But there was no problem — we loved it," he said.

He bought the cold storage plant, then expanded to build the large new store. "I was fortunate to be here at the right time — when the economy

took hold. This is a positive, optimistic area — you don't hear many complaints. And it's a good place for new enterprise if the would-be-business has been thought through in terms of community."

Another long-time resident, Ralph Bjornstad, is assistant director of the port. At 57, he says Sand Point is getting to be old for him. One suspects that is said tongue in cheek, for he also says he does not wish to live any other place else — "not with the cost of getting out," also said with a sly grin.

But it's not just the long-time residents who find Sand Point a good place to live. Debra "Debbie" Dushkin, city clerk and chairman of the Centennial Commission, says, "I can't want to live elsewhere. The physical surroundings play a part in that, but this community has no divisions between locals and outsiders. Factions and feuds which sometimes arise are not serious."

"If high school graduates go away to college immediately, they stay away six or seven years, but something draws most of them back. There is a warm commitment."

Leslie Foss, chef at the Ship's Anchor, is a newcomer, arriving in Sand Point a year ago this month. She felt the pull of the island at once. "I look with clear windows, willing to see the beauty. I met Nellie Osterback on a grey day and she said, 'Isn't it a beautiful day?' And it was. I don't need the sun. I just turn my perspective to all the little things. Outside I never had a chance to appreciate



Leslie Foss

them."

"I'll live in Sand Point as long as I can walk," says Andrew Gronholdt, born there 72 years ago. And talk of walking is not idle, for Andrew says he walked the equivalent of nearly eight times around the world — all in the Shumagins and part of the lower Alaska Peninsula. He did this over the years helping carry mail, following a trap line, working on the island fox farms and hiking for the love of exploration.

Gronholdt is a valuable resource to Sand Point in many ways, but most especially for his marvelous curiosity which had led him to discover the history of the area and geologic finds such as petrified wood stumps on an eroding Unga beach cliff. He has turned his shipwright experiences into working with wood to duplicate Aleut tool and artifacts such as a baidarka pump and a spear-throwing board.

His keen memory makes him invaluable at this Centennial time as Sand Point is piecing together its history for a permanent record of the first 100 years.

So, why is Sand Point? No matter the remoteness, rain and wind, it's a great place to live. Just ask the people who live there.