

## OPINION:

# Looking at Native Heritage Park through Native Heritage eyes

by Joe Senungetuk

I see a growing momentum in two seemingly diametrically opposed aspects of Native affairs: 1) the social problems and the abuse of drugs, alcohol and other addictive compounds which can be directly attributable to the general degradation of Native identity and health. 2) The movement to build a Native Heritage Park in Anchorage which seems outwardly to organize a voice and relative power for entitlement on various issues concerning out abilities as a Native people to get on with everyday life.

Do you see it too? It's like watching two powerful oxen being hitched up to the same oxcart. And there are two drivers. One says, "Hey, let's get all messed up ... let's get high ... forget ... zone out ... can't do anything anyway...."

The other driver is a little more mature or he follows the perennial straight but narrow path.

In regards to the Native Heritage Park (NHP), I hear a people desperate for leadership and wishing to see our cultural and traditional convictions alive or at least capable of some sort of funding CPR. How would NHP do it? Build model villages and otherwise equip tourists with a reason to spend their money on a few hours or days of "enlightenment?" And allow a handful of Native resource people and administrative staff an annual income derived from selling what? Native-ness, I suppose. Do you see what I'm getting at? There seems to be a growing momentum on the two opposing sides of the Native coin. One is sliding off the end of the earth and the other wants to resist that. But how? Well, the other driver seems to be saying, "Let's make hay while the sun shines ... let's grab some land in the largest white man's settlement in Alaska (and concomitantly the largest Native village in Alaska) and sell some of our Nativeness before it disappears."

A recent television program covered the ability of the Pueblo Indians of the southwest United States to drive off the Spaniards and the white settlers who at various times threatened them with extinction.

The Spaniards came from what is now Mexico and Florida and they were on a quest for gold and other sundry items needed to finance Spain's rapid takeovers of land and resources around the world. The white settlers came from the eastern seaboard of the U.S. and they too were looking for more conquests for their own kind and the laws and land acquisition practices of both European cultures, the Spaniards and the settlers, plus their more powerful firearms and cannons, made it easy for them to intimidate the original inhabitants of the southern plains.

That same intimidation, I

might add, is happening right now in Alaska. But let's get back to my main train of thought.... Their (the Pueblo Indians) main weapon they say is the retention of their identity through a resolve never to forget their language, number one; and their religion, which is directly related to language as says their leaders.

It was a telling and complete portrait of a people who cannot let down their guard for a moment. I have always had the impression that the Hopi, the Navajo and the Zunis have such unpenetrable religious/language beliefs that the missionaries and the non-Indian teachers who have tried to rid them of "heathen" and "barbaric" notions have pretty much given up at this point in time. But there it was: One shot of the tourist industry showed a line of pastel colored sport clothed tourists queuing up the traditionally dressed Indian as he collected the one dollar and five dollar bills from them.

I wondered what had happened to that poignant statement uttered earlier in the program, "The way we are going to survive culturally is to know our language and our religious ceremonies...." I suppose there is room for cottage craft industries, privately run song and dance troupes, county fairs and the annual marketing agents supplied by the Fur Rendezvous, the college craft fairs and the AFN Convention — these to me are viable and already institutionalized gestures of free trade here in Anchorage. Even though I have some qualms about quality control and such in some of them.

**"What the Native Heritage Park intends to do is to run bus-loads from the airport or from downtown and offer them a one-stop-shop-and-save show."**

What the Native Heritage Park intends to do is to run bus-loads from the airport or from downtown and offer them a one-stop-shop-and-save show. It is a tourist industry capital venture. And you are going to vote on it for public funding and a relinquishment of land-title from the City of Anchorage for a 12.4 million dollar concern.

I urge you to think about this. Not for the lame excuses bandied about the save the park for dogs and skiers and nature lovers crowd. But for the sake of Native pride, Native soul and Native prioritization. Think about teaching young Native people language and Native religion. I'm sure that the planners of NHP are going to argue about the intent of the park to teach these doctrines. I am part of a committee selected by the Chancellor of UAA in order to begin the process of installing Native studies as a formal addition to the studies already in place.

There was a concerted effort by the NHP organizers to ask for your vote in favor of not repealing the proposition at the moment of this writing. "The Heritage Park has developed cooperative agreements with the Anchorage School District and local universities to enhance the curriculum in social studies, science and Native issues."

In my 16 years of living in Anchorage, I have only seen pain and suffering as Native resource people ache to be involved and/or invited into the educational process. And if you think that a tourist venture will supply the programming once and for all, go and look at any third world tourist attraction and at their school systems — where is there a fair and just integration of cultural and educational programming.

Now think about teaching young Native people the subjects of language and Native religion. Think about 12 million. I wonder if we are getting the biggest flim-flam job in Alaska's history by having CIRI, the larger Native corporations and perhaps this newspaper openly and unblinkingly endorsing this project and asking for Alaska Native citizen support for something which was not originally thought of by Native artists or leaders.

All we would be doing is again endorsing or at least passively agreeing to a notion which purports to have community support but is not a Native trait, is not a dream of anyone Native and artist or leader, and is not an answer nor a solution to the all-important and serious deterioration being

done to our Native social fiber by the lack of educational programming in our schools, by a lack of forthright and honest coverage of Native affairs and historical happenings by media and by a shortage of earnest effort by our Native corporations to actively fund Native art and Native education programs?

I've known the non-Natives who concoct these "Native dreams." I met the well-known playwright who wrote "Yup'ik Antigone." I've worked with the various Anchorage Museum directors. They are well-intentioned non-Natives who I feel would genuinely like to see Native self-worth and identity get a well-deserved boost from good and well-planned programming. Instead, they are too easily misled and fooled by their own kind — the milieu of western thought and action coupled by aggressive and capitalistic "solution finding." And now, many of them consider

themselves "Joe's enemies." Or they say, "Oh that's just Joe mouthing off again." Yes, I have mouthed off occasionally in the past and I regretfully admit to wasting a lot of time and energy with too much hatred and backlash type of quarreling going on rather than sensible and deliberate peace talks. One of the Anchorage Museum Board of Di-

rectors and "Native Art professorships" confronted me recently and scolded, "Joe! What is the big idea of writing that Board of Directors of the Museum is a racist group?" An on and on for about a half hour. In front of my wife and family. "The museum provides the community with Native art exhibits and dances and shows..." I tried to tell her that the physical layout with white artists and their historic depiction of pioneer life and consequently Native contact as one permanent exhibit and the other as part of the diorama and behind glass exhibit tells its own story. I didn't help plan it that way. The Board of Directors did. But she left the lunch table completely satisfied that she had told me off.

Most of these non-Native people are good people. The problem is, as I see it, they are used to the grant-writing and funding agency procedures and can therefore have far-reaching effects on the Native community's program alternatives. These "successful" programs are evaluated according to how closely to the needs of Natives they are and then sooner or later they are available for vote acceptance or rejection. The grant writers act as our spokespersons, our innovators and our guardians. As I have said, some of them are admirable people. But when their proposals are funded and are endorsed by us, they are then very well paid spokespersons. Let's not advertise their programs in our Native corporate bulk mailing packets. Let's not endorse their programs in total. Let's think. Think of the outcome. How our children and grandchildren will be affected and how we can all contribute to our own programming and our own needs.

Finally, let's turn the tables on the scene momentarily and see how ludicrous it is to want to "sell a little culture." Here in Anchorage, we have a community of 200,000. Ten thousand are Native (I don't know the real number as this is a rough guess). It is roughly 5%. History has treated that 5% very badly throughout Anchorage's 75 plus years of existence. So now that minority wants to open up an enterprise which deems to show the world

its prides and joys as far as cultural traits go. That's what's happening in a nutshell. OK. Suppose we plan instead a White Heritage Park? Using the same justifications as above, we would probably see this? The same acreage at the same site. But white people, wanting to attract tourists while building self-worth and self-identity would then offer



ALASKA NATIVE  
HERITAGE PARK

these highlights of their proud culture — nice middle-class fenced in homes, maybe a two car garage. The family unit would be — a nicely dressed (three-piece suit for the man and the latest fashions for the lady of the house and for their kids ... well, you see the kids not he streets today; very lightly dressed in spite of the cold climate — but smartly!) There would be a TV, a VCR, a couple of dial tone push button telephones, a microwave oven, and modernistic furniture inside the home. But for some strange reason, much of this stuff would be made in Japan or Korea. The lawn would be clipped shortly and be very green.

As far as activities go; let's see, how about the man rushing out every morning and rushing back every evening? The lady of the house would putter around the house smiling and scolding her kids who also happen to be rushing in and out too. How about dancing activities? Well, let's have a neighborhood bar nearby and a super market and... and... well, I'm sure you get the picture by now. Let's face it; tourists would not really want to pay to see this. They already are the stereotyped image of white people I am painting for you now.

Why would these people want to pay to watch Native people sing and dance and otherwise occupy a model village? Because they do stereotype us too! And they want to verify through some means that we are capable of seeking our lowest marketable denominations which they can then issue their pocket money, hand it over to the collector and watch. And this type of watching does not enlighten their understanding of our problems, our being oppressed educationally, economically and socially. Rather it tends to build up their ego and their resolve to keep on infiltrating our guard, plant themselves in our corporate world and scheme to keep us in this demeaning process, even if it costs millions and especially if we endorse it blindly and us not offering any better plan to safeguard our children and our grandchildren by teaching them language and Native religion.