

The Pribilofs - An Alaska Trail of Tears?

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The leaders of the largest Aleut population center in the world are engaging in what may be the most aggressive and comprehensive economic mobilization efforts in Bush Alaska today, in a fight for the economic survival of St. Paul and St. George villages.

All human and monetary resources of all organizations on both islands have been brought to bear on the immense challenges and critical problems caused by the elimination, within five months, of the only economic base the Prib-

ilofs ever had since the Russians brought enslaved Aleuts to these islands two centuries ago.

In August 1982 the Reagan administration announced its intentions to phase-out federal funding for the Pribilofs by September 30, 1983. To the Pribilovians, this means elimination of funding for 73 percent of their wage base, all marine transportation which brings critical supplies to the islands four times a year, operation of the power plants, purchase-supply-delivery of all home heating fuel and gasoline, maintenance of all water, power, sewer and road sys-

tems. The change will dictate an overwhelming change of lifestyle and cultural environment.

Pribilof Aleuts and their leaders are no strangers to drastic change or tragic challenges to the human spirit. In 1867, after the Treaty of Cessions, the United States took direct control over the Pribilofs and their inhabitants. The only change in treatment or status this jurisdictional transfer resulted in was that the Aleuts were no longer Russian slaves; instead, they were American wards placed in a state of servitude and seals were still the first class cit-

izens.

From 1867 through the 1940's, the harsh labor, meager food rations and disease took their toll, requiring the colonial rulers to re-stock their Aleut labor supply annually from Aleutian villages. Genetic experimentation was seriously considered by the U.S. agents as a means to develop a more "hardy" stock. The islands were managed as a prison designed to ensure that the captive and able labor force was always present to generate revenues for government coffers from sale of fur seal pelts.

This was accomplished by preventing travel, educational

and organizational development, written communication with the outside, accumulation of money, expansion of needs and desires by ensuring that Aleuts did not get amenities enjoyed by the U.S. agents and development of new economic activities.

To protest the conditions meant loss of job, loss of home and even deportation. In WWII, Pribilof Aleuts were interned in S.E. Alaska where they lost 25 percent of their population, mostly infants and the elderly, to malnutrition, disease and heat prostration. Ironically, it was this event that set the foundation for political independence. The federal agents in charge of the camps attempted to prevent Aleut men from joining the armed forces.

A few brave men escaped the internment camp, knowing full well that they may never be allowed to return to their homes in the Pribilofs again. They did this to find work in Juneau and to join the Army Corps of Engineers, which readily signed up the eager men. This gave these men the first real taste of freedom, never having experienced it before. This new experience made the men realize that what was being done to their people was not the way people had to be treated, and in fact was terribly wrong.

As if predestined, these men were in the only community in Alaska which had a well-organized entity fighting for Native rights — the Alaska Native Brotherhood. It was ANB and their attorney Felix Cohen that advised the Pribilovians how to organize, set up a government sanctioned IRA and to take forceful legal action to correct injustices. Upon return to the Pribilofs, these men put their new knowledge to work, formed an IRA in 1950 and in 1951, launched a major lawsuit against the U.S. government for breach of human rights. The lawsuit was settled out of court 28 years later.

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Aleut economic history full of uncertainty

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With a political platform recognized by the U.S. government, the plight of the Aleuts slowly came into public view. At the height of its influence in the United Nations, the United States was publicly chastised by the U.N. in 1958 for its treatment of Pribilof Aleuts. Howard Rock, upon forming the Tundra Times, took up the Aleuts' banner and began writing glaring editorials and publishing letters from Pribilof leaders which spoke of servitude.

This publicity prompted the State Human Rights Commission, under direction of Willard Bowman — a black man, to investigate the charges of human rights violations. The 1964 report of the Commission's investigation in turn prompted a Congressional investigation in 1965 by Senator Bartlett. In 1966, the Aleut civil rights bill, ironically called the Fur Seal Act of 1966, passed Congress.

The Act provided the vehicles for true political independence by allowing Aleut ownership of land and opportunity to create a municipality

under State laws. Because of a total lack of outside institutional contacts and the Aleut leaderships' unfamiliarity with these institutions, a city was not created until 1971.

With the creation of a city on St. Paul and village corporations on both islands in 1972, the means to engage in economic development became available. It was not until 1975 that the communities actually undertook development projects after undergoing accelerated learning experiences in organization and operation of corporations and a municipality. During the decade of the 70's, Aleut leaders had to travel to Washington annually to fight off efforts to cut federal funds and stop the seal harvest.

From one year to the next, the Pribilof Aleuts never knew if they would have a livelihood. The strain of this uncertainty and the stress of an insecure economic future took a heavy toll on the people. This situation worsened in 1980 through 1982 when conservation extremists launched a public campaign blitz against the seal harvest. In this two-year per-

iod, St. Paul experienced three suicides, one accidental death related to alcohol, murder of two young men and four other deaths resulting from high stress and alcohol.

Suicides were never known in the Pribilofs in its history, and there had been only one shooting in the past 100 years. Alcohol related deaths were virtually non-existent until very recently. These grim facts have resulted in an atmosphere of community wide depression and a feeling of true desperation.

With such pressures, the community leaders on both St. George and St. Paul went into action with no reservations about what must be done to seek a secure future with true self-sufficiency under their control. Experts were hired in the fields of small business, community planning, economic development, organizational planning, skills development, human relations, fishery development, tourism and port planning. Studies and analyses were made on every conceivable commercial enterprise that may be viable in the Pribilofs.

Local organizations pooled

over two million dollars of their own funds to tackle this immense task and coordinated efforts of some 16 different public and private institutions from Washington, D.C. to Alaska — to help in directing and administering some 80 plus economic development and planning projects mobilized in just the last two years. The general conclusion arrived at by all involved is that neither St. George nor St. Paul will be economically viable without fishery ports, regardless of all other efforts.

The Pribilofs are strategically located in the middle of one of the richest bottom-fish grounds in the world and the bulk of the commercially viable quantities of haircrab and blue king crab in the Bering Sea are only minutes away from the islands. The fishing industry agrees that there is a great demand for port facilities in the Pribilofs and, as far as new port facilities are concerned, should be the state's number one priority.

Despite the tremendous challenges and problems of the government's phase-out and the

prospect of major lifestyle and cultural changes with phase-in of the fishery economy, the people of the islands are exhibiting characteristics that allowed their ancestors to survive for 10,000 years in the Aleutians under the harshest of circumstances.

Individuals are making plans to purchase small boats to engage in commercial fisheries. Aleut students are engaging in training and college education programs in refrigeration, small boat operations, fishery management, outboard motor and small boat repair, small business management, personnel supervision, bookkeeping and accounting.

The leaders are actively and aggressively lobbying for state funds for fishery facilities after having done the requisite homework. St. Paul, for example, is completing analyses of present and future water, power and sewer requirements, transportation needs, land use planning and zoning needs and options, fishery resource and economic analyses, legal and institutional development control options, fishery business needs and requirements.

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Pribilofs could be modern 'Trail of Tears'

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Pribilof Aleuts, in their undying commitment to succeed under adverse circumstances, have the help of good friends and influential allies in Anchor-

age, Juneau, Seattle, and Washington. From the beginning point of total elimination of federal funds, Anchorage attorney J. Anthony (Tony) Smith played a key role in getting

Washington's agreement that a phase-out should be negotiated between the parties and that money should be an integral part of any settlement.

Were it not for the adept

skills of NOAA's Deputy Administrator, Dr. Calio, the negotiations could have failed miserably. Without the teamwork of truly committed professionals and the islands' lead-

ers, requests for port funds may not have been included in the governor's budget.

The future for Pribilof Aleuts is still gravely uncertain. The negotiations with Washington are still on-going. Money for the Pribilof ports must still pass the legislature. The very existence of the Pribilof communities, home to the world's largest group of Aleuts, hangs now on the thread of fiscal politics in Juneau.

At a time of major political pressures from all corners of Alaska, in conditions of continuously declining state revenues, the Pribilofs may become a victim once again of political priorities.

Success or failure, Pribilovians are prepared for the fact that their lifestyle of generations will be overturned in five months; but failure will give Alaska an example of a modern TRAIL OF TEARS to call its own.