

Northwest Trade Fair commemorates gatherings

For hundreds of years before the coming of traders and settlers to northwest Alaska, Kotzebue Sound was the site of largest regular gatherings in the pre-historic Eskimo world.

On July 6-9 of this year, Kotzebue residents are inviting guests to join them at the Northwest Native Trade Fair, their fourth annual commemoration of the ancient summer trade gathering which helped to unite the Inuit people from Siberia, the Seward Peninsula, and northern Alaska.

The Trade Fair will be held this year in conjunction with the ARCO-Jessie Owens Games at the Fair Grounds adjoining the Kotzebue Senior Citizens Cultural Center. The Fair is scheduled to follow directly on the heels of the Kotzebue 4th of July celebration sponsored and organized by the Kotzebue Lions Club.

Regular tourist attractions such as the NANA Museum Show will also be offered throughout the days of the Trade Fair, and visitors are expected from as far away as southern California and the east coast.

Each year, hundreds of visitors join with summer tourists and local residents for feasting, singing, fashion shows of traditional garments, contests of skill and Eskimo dancing far into the sunny arctic nights.

Contestants of all ages will

try their skill at kayak racing, the one- and two-foot high kick, harpoon throwing, the arm pull, the wrist carry, as well as domestic skills such as seal-skinning and duck plucking (which will also add to the variety of traditional foods available at the final Feast). The schedule includes a tug-of-war, kids races, donut making, and some old indoor entertainments such as rock juggling and a blind-folded shoe hunt.

Always the highlight of the Trade Fair, Eskimo dancing will go on after dinner each night until well past midnight, featuring groups from St. Lawrence Island, Nome, Point Hope, Wainwright, Barrow, Kotzebue, and other northern villages.

Prizes are awarded for skill and grace to individuals, couples, and groups, and each dance troupe includes both older experts and teenagers who are joining in the statewide revival of traditional Native artforms. The judges are village Elders from each of the geographic regions participating.

The ancient trade gathering which the Trade Fair commemorates was usually a two-week encampment at Sesolik, a traditional seal-hunting site south of Cape Krusenstern near the mouth of the Noatak River.

Interior dwellers from the

Kobuk and the Upper Noatak Rivers travelled by boat after the early seal-hunting season, and were joined by coastal residents from Barrow, Wainwright, Point Hope and Kivalina, the northern Seward Peninsula, Diomedes, King Island, Wales, and even Siberian Eskimos from across the Bering Straits.

The river-dwellers often had trade goods they received from Indians in contact with British traders in the Canadian Yukon, and Siberians and Diomedes people brought European merchandise such as trade beads.

Anthropologists believe that as many as 2,000 people would make their way to Sesolik for the Fair in its heyday in the mid-1800's. Each village camped in the same place every year, and trading partnerships were formed which persisted through generations, enabling interior residents to trade their stock of surplus

caribou hides, birch baskets, spruce gum and other local specialties for such coastal products as seal oil, a necessary nutrient and source of heat and light.

Trade fairs and trading relationships such as those formed at the Sesolik fair were central elements in traditional Eskimo life across the arctic, and enable the widely dispersed Inuit people to share news and new ideas across a vast geographic territory.

They were an occasion for the cessation of inter-group animosities and contributed to the continuing development and adaptation of Eskimo technology and culture. Ceremonial events such as story-telling, dancing, and contests of skill were part of the attraction that lured visitors over long distances before motorized travel was introduced.

The Sesolik trade fair was often a chance for individuals

with a score to settle to outwit one another with clever, subtle lyrics intended to embarrass transgressors. Song duels were judged by the audience on the basis of artistic merit and wit, and the acknowledged loser was expected to bury his complaint by hosting a lavish feast at the conclusion of the contest.

Many of the best song duels have survived as a part of the rich Inuit oral tradition.

The volunteers organizing the Northwest Native Trade Fair encourage visitors to come join in the fun, which is free of charge to the public. Housing has been arranged for participants in the homes of local families, and hotel accommodations are also available in Kotzebue.

Visitors are encouraged to bring contributions of food and to come supplied with a stock of arts and crafts to sell and trade.