

Soviets: Just ordinary people

by Barbara Crane

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KOTZEBUE — I guess if I had to name the one most astounding thing about the seven citizens of the Soviet Far East who visited

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• Soviets are really 'ordinary people'

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Kotzebue last week, it would have to be that they were all so ordinary.

Ordinary people, who, for whatever reasons, had attained sufficient rank and position to be visiting with equally ordinary Americans.

And these visits back and forth the Bering Strait have become almost commonplace.

When we gathered for meals at Kotzebue's Nullagvik Hotel, no one at the other tables seemed surprised by, or all that interested in, our attempts to communicate the details of our lives through a mixture of English, Russian, Inupiaq, drawings on napkins and sign language.

These days, at least in our corner of the world, it's no longer us (the good guys) versus them (the bad ones).

It's just all of us very ordinary people trying to live together the best way we know how.

"All my life those Russian places were just names on a map," recalled Willie Hensley, president of NANA Regional Corp. "I wondered what was over there and what the people were like."

The more time we spent together, the more we realized — despite some differences in style — how much we had in common.

The "shop till you drop" syndrome seemed to affect these visitors just as severely as it does any rural Alaskan making a trip into Anchorage. Their bags were filled to overflowing with gadgets and gifts for their families and friends back home.

As we spent time together and had a chance to talk, anyone

discovering some sort of family tie with the Soviet visitors felt strong and immediate kinship.

Chuck Greene, Northwest Arctic Borough mayor, discovered a relationship, back in the great-grandfather era, with Alimbek Dobriev, representative of a Chukotka elders group.

Tommy Ongtooguk of Kotzebue was excited by his conversation with Yakov Tagyek, leader of the Uelen Eskimo Dance Group.

"Yakov says the same names appear in both of our families," Ongtooguk said. "I know there are Soviet roots on my father's side, and they used to visit back and forth."

As he posed for a photograph with his new relation Ongtooguk said he hopes to visit Tagyek someday.

Tagyek was particularly popular with the elders he met and with other Inupiaq speakers.

"Yakov is from right across from Little Diomedé," said Willie Goodwin, mayor of Kotzebue. "He speaks a dialect that is close to our Inupiaq, so I've been able to communicate with him. Not fluently, but we've been able to talk."

The Soviet guests enjoyed their rides in boats and on three-wheelers.

In fact, Hensley said the delegation was "crazy" about riding on Hondas.

"We found out they're just like the rest of us — they like to go as fast as they can on anything they can," he said.

Some of the Soviet visitors were guests in Chuck and Marie Greene's home.

OPINION

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"I've spent all week with them, and it's really amazing how impressed they are with things we take for granted," said Marie, president of Maniilaq Association.

Among them were the stacks and stacks of new textbooks the Soviets saw during their tour of Kotzebue's schools.

"We don't have anything as nice or as new as these," said Lyudmila Tkatchenko, a teacher and interpreter for the group.

She indicated that the only textbooks they have available to use are old and filled with inaccurate but formerly "politically correct" history.

With *glasnost*, the real facts are becoming known, she said, but it will take a long time for the Soviet printing industry to get around to printing the new textbooks.

As a teacher, she was happy to be invited to join some Kotzebue High School students on a picnic one evening.

"I was surprised at how friendly and relaxed the students were with me, a stranger," she said. "They asked many questions right away. My students would never

have spoken so freely so soon with a stranger. Everyone is so free here."

Yuri Tototto, delegation leader and chairman of the Chukotka District executive committee, admired the newly remodeled Kotzebue schools.

"I can see how important your children are to you and how much you love them," he said. "You have so many programs and have spent so much money and taken so much time and effort to make things nice for the children."

Speaking of children, Valeri Nikolaev, a specialist with the Department of Foreign Economic Relations, showed the delight of a child when he realized that crossing the International Dateline gave him two birthdays this year.

It was Aug. 17 on the Soviet side when they left, and the next day, on our side, it was Aug. 17 again.

By the end of the visit, at a farewell dinner for the Soviet guests, we were very relaxed with each other and able to joke freely.

As a gift, NANA directors Reggie Joule and Luke Sampson presented Tototto with a videocassette player. With it came a box of movies, including some of Hollywood's most exaggerated caricatures of the Red Menace: "From Russian With Love," "The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming," "Red Heat," "Red Dawn" and even "Rooskies."

Tototto went along with the joke.

"Can't wait to get home and watch these movies," he said, "so I can find out what those Russians are really like!"