

Pribilof Aleut abuses continued into 1960's

(Editor's Note: Last month, the Tundra Times reported the Pribilof Aleuts were awarded more than \$11 million by the Indian Claims Commission in damages for the failure of the Government to provide adequate goods and services, food and compensation as promised. Although the period covered in the claim was from 1870 to 1946, this account written in 1964 by former assistant editor Tom Snapp indicates maltreatment and abuses of the Aleuts by the Government continued into the 1960s.)

BY THOMAS A. SNAPP

Most people think slavery in the United States was abolished with the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation.

Yet today in the Far North, in Alaska, slavery still exists, in milder form perhaps than existed in the deep South, but slavery nonetheless.

The Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands are today living in servitude to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

So strongly are they dominated by that federal agency, the Pribilof Islanders:

1. Are being prevented from meeting and hearing political candidates.

2. Are being arbitrarily moved against their wishes.

3. Are being pressed into an economic situation similar to that of certain West Virginia coal miners "who owe their souls to the company store."

About 800 Pribilovians populate St. George and St. Paul, two largest of the five Pribilofs. Their occupation is the catching and skinning of the fur seals protected by a 1912 International Treaty negotiated by the Soviet Union, Japan, Canada and the United States. The treaty restricts the taking of fur seals to their breeding grounds.

Main Breeding Grounds

The Pribilovians are indispensable in the multi-million dollar seal skin enterprise, the profits of which are shared by those four countries, since the Pribilofs are the world's principal breeding grounds for the fur seal.

About 75 percent of them congregate there each spring for mating, and where the young are born.

Division of Profits

Under the treaty, the U.S. must give 15 percent of the seal catch on the Pribilofs to Japan and Canada and the Russians must give 15 percent to Japan and Canada from their catch on the Commander and Robben islands, the other less important breeding grounds.

The Aleuts harvest the seals, the seal skins are processed in

the lower states, and the skins are sold on the open market in New York City to the highest bidder.

From the proceeds an amount is deducted for expenses and overhead.

Instead of payment to the Aleuts in cash for their services, which would have allowed them economic independence, the Fish and Wildlife Service for a great many years kept them in a state of dependency by providing them services but little or no cash.

Seal Bonus

Up until 1949 they were furnished food, fuel, clothing and some housing, but each sealer was given only \$200 to \$300 per year as a seal bonus.

Unaccustomed to Money

The result of this policy of little cash was that they did not fully learn the value and use of money. When students went away to Mt. Edgecumbe or training in the lower states, they had difficulty adjusting and adults were afraid to move from the islands and come face to face with a money economy.

Semi-Wage Plan

During World War II when there was a threat of Japanese invasion, the Pribilovians were temporarily relocated in the Juneau area. When the Aleuts returned to the Pribilofs afterwards, there were protests and criticism of the Fish and Wildlife policy and a ten-year semi-wage plan was put into effect. The plan was not too effective, however, since only nominal wages were paid above subsistence.

Deeper in Debt

In July, 1962, a new wage plan was put into effect. For the sealing season, the Pribilovians are paid wages by the Kodiak naval scale for board workers. The only trouble is that they are charged for everything—from food and fuel to leasing of their own homes—and since their expense continues throughout the year, their income does not begin to meet their expenses. The Pribilovians are having to live on a combination of wages, "rocking chair" compensation and welfare. They are getting deeper and deeper into debt.

Correspondent Threatened

In October, 1962 the Rev. Deacon Smile V. Gromoff, the president of St. Paul Island, became a correspondent for Tundra Times. He wrote an article published in the November 1, 1962 issue in which he brought out the strong opposition of the Pribilovians to the plan by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Shortly thereafter, Gromoff



St. Paul in the Pribilof Islands, about 1962

was ordered by Russian Church superiors (probably under pressure or at the suggestion of government officials) to give up "political" activities or be expelled as a Deacon or ex-communicated.

Correspondent Resigns

Gromoff hadn't considered himself as a politician, simply considered it his Christian duty to try to guide his people.

Deeply religious, Gromoff resigned his presidency from the village council and stopped writing for this paper.

Plan Imposed

The administration of affairs on the Pribilofs is by the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries branch of the Fish and Wildlife Service with headquarters in Seattle. In 1962 it announced a plan to retrain and relocate about half of the Pribilovians from the islands. According to an employee, only part-time work was being furnished the Aleuts but if half of them were relocated, full time work could be furnished the remainder.

The plan, which was imposed from the top down, was arbitrary and the wishes of the people were not taken into account. So great have been the protests that the plan has been modified somewhat. Instead of moving half the Pribilovians from the islands the inhabitants of St. George are being moved to St. Paul.

Head-on Clash

In 1962 a community development social worker was employed presumably to work with the people at arriving at their own destiny. But efforts along this line clashed head on with the plans of the administration.

The administration had its own "improvement plan" which it was determined to put forward. The plan looks good on paper particularly since it is doctored up in bureaucratic terms. New homes are being built on St. Paul enticing a few of the St. George Islanders at a time to move there.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has reduced the sealing season from about six months to three months. The service has also made an abrupt change in the policy in regard to killing female fur seals. After decades of struggle to prohibit the female seal from being killed, they are now being slaughtered.

Along with shortening the season, reducing the hours and number of workers, the Bureau of Fisheries is pushing efforts to get back from the Aleuts as much as possible of the money it pays them.

summer the Canadians started producing and selling mink meal to the lower 48 states.

Unbelievable Restrictions

The restrictions on visitors to the Pribilofs are almost beyond belief considering the fact that the islands are not of military strategic importance. Visitors are captive of the airline that

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serves the islands, not that this is desired by the airline. A regulation requires that all visitors be kept in direct observation by airline personnel while they are on the islands.

If a person must deliver a message to a person on the islands, he must be accompanied to the door of that person's home by an airline attendant.

Can't Campaign Here

Recently, a candidate for the State Senate, Carl Moses of King Cove, went to St. Paul Island to campaign for election. When he arrived there, he was refused permission to campaign and was told permission would have to come from Seattle. Permission could not be readily obtained and he was forced to leave without talking with his constituents.

Last week at the Alaska Native Brotherhood Convention at Hoonah, in the keynote speech, E.L. Kiethahn, curator of the State Museum at Juneau, traced the early history of slavery among the Aleuts.

History of Slavery

"The attitude prevailed through the Aleutian Islands as the promyshlenniki (Russian hunters), unable to catch the sea otters themselves, enslaved the Aleut hunters and forced them to leave their families and accompany them from island to island through the chain and on to Prince William Sound and beyond, never to return," he said.

"In less than 20 years the entire Aleut population estimated at 16,000 souls, had been enslaved then reduced to some 2,000 at the most."