

What others say—

Elders Conference

From the Anchorage Daily News

As the elders of the Seward Peninsula gathered in Nome last week to share with others the heritage they represent for all Alaska's cultures, an important lesson was there to be learned by the rest of us, as well.

A quiet majesty pervades the purpose of this conference and others like it. Organized and carried through by young people in the developing Native corporations, the recognition of wisdom and knowledge available from village elders represents an insight often lost in our age of venerated youth.

In the dramatic change of culture facing Native Alaskans today, the exchange information between generations is especially important. Residents of the Seward Peninsula — and many rural areas of Alaska like it — face not only the predictable passing of one generation into another but also the essential changing of a way of life. Knowledge of life and the land evolved in the era of grandparents now living in the region, for example, will probably never again be duplicated. Circumstances that gave birth to their experiences have passed, for the most part, never to be presented again.

And yet the worth of that knowledge lives on. How often we are reminded that wisdom born in simpler days bears value for the present. Again and again we learn that mistakes we make today could have been avoided with the experience of the past to guide us. Knowledge is cumulative, but not always current; it is well said that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it.

Western culture is a newcomer to the North; for most of us, Alaska roots are shallow. Even oldtimers measure their span in decades here, and few claim even generational longevity. The continuity and security of extended families is usually absent, and dislocation is a common malady.

For all these reasons, and more, we should look closely at the example offered by conference organizers in Nome and elsewhere who have taken these first steps toward increased connection with our past. Whether in elaborate, video-taped conferences or in private conversation over morning coffee, there is a wealth to be gleaned from communication between generations.