

Many Carry-Overs Remain Of Servitude in Pribilofs

By TOM SNAPP

Are the people of the Pribilof Islands living in servitude?

Not in the strict sense of the word but many carry-over bonds of servitude remain on the islands.

In a nutshell, the Pribilovians live in luxurious surroundings with an appalling lack of independence and security.

They cannot own land. The government owns the homes in which they live. They depend almost entirely upon the government for employment. More than a dozen Pribilovians told this reporter they were afraid to speak at a public meeting for fear of losing their jobs.

Until recently an archaic pass system required everyone coming or going from the islands to have a

permit from the Seattle office of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries.

"I do not consider myself free as you and other people in Alaska," said Gabe Stepetin, who has been president of the St. Paul village off and on for 20 years.

Stepetin made the statement in a tape recorded interview for publication. He indicated he was taking a chance of losing his job for making the statement.

"We are in servitude," said the Rev. Deacon Smile V. Grqmov, who was forced to resign as president of St. Paul in 1962 when he wrote articles for this paper.

"The only way I became free is by becoming a priest," said Father Michael D. Lestenkof, of the Rus-

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Many Carry-Overs of Servitude Remain.

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sian Orthodox Church at St. Paul. Father Lestenkov indicated that the Church owned its land and for that reason he had much more freedom than the people to whom he ministered.

"The charges that you printed that we are in servitude are true," said Agafangel Merculief, of St. George Island.

The five-member commission appointed by Governor Egan in public meetings on both islands skirted the question of servitude—they did not ask about it. It was brought up in public meetings briefly only twice, both at St. Paul by a Pribilofian each time.

In a meeting shortly after arriving on St. Paul, Ilidor Merculief said, "We were in servitude before 1950, but it's not the same today."

Most of the Pribilofians are employed in sealing, but Merculief has civil service GS-7 status and works in administration office of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries at St. Paul.

Merculief became president after Gromoff was forced to resign in 1962.

The statement of Village President Merculief was diametrically contradicted by the Rev. Deacon Gromoff, former village president, in a public meeting. Gromoff indicated, in his opinion, the people were in servitude and cited a definition of servitude from the Bible to the effect if a people were kept in the dark and not apprised of information, they are in servitude.

He cited another scripture also, "The truth shall make you free."

This reporter could find no basis for the headline blazoned across newspapers "Pribilofians deny servitude."

In a press conference in Juneau in December, of which a tape recording was provided this paper, Pribilof Program Director Howard Baltzo said, "The people are complaining we're trying to end servitude too soon."

In the meetings there was much testimony of serious complaints, one of which was that although the Pribilofians had worked for the federal government for many years they had been given seniority only since 1950. It was brought out one man 62 years of age had worked for the government for more than 40 years, was not unable to work, and until Willard Bowman came in March on a preliminary investigation the Pribilofian was receiving no retirement benefits and was "having to go door to door bumming." Since Bowman's visit, he has been receiving \$15 a month in groceries.

At the public hearing on St. George Island, at which almost all of the heads of households attended, all testimony by Pribilofians substantiated the Tundra Times charge that the people were being forced to move to St. Paul against their will.

In the December press conference interview, Baltzo denied this and said there was a long waiting list of St. Georgians who wanted to move.

The St. George people testified all construction was taking place on St. Paul and carpenters, plumbers, etc. were told if they didn't move to St. Paul they would have no jobs. "They didn't want to move, but they had to when they were told they would have no job unless they did," said Mrs. Susie Merculief.

At the beginning of the public hearing, Secretary of State Hugh J. Wade attempted to persuade the St. George people to move to St. Paul.

Pribilof Director Baltzo said the government was going a half million dollars in the red maintaining St. George and if the two villages of St. Paul and St. George were consolidated, it would mean a saving to the federal government and a resulting saving to the state.

Seventy per cent of the U.S. net in the seal skin industry is turned over to the state. The state treas-

ury gets roughly a million dollars a year.

But Secretary Wade became flushed and stammered when James C. Rettie, of the office of Secretary of Interior Udall, also a commission member, turned thumbs down on the moving of the St. George people against their will.

Rettie expressed surprise at a policy outlined by Baltzo in which he stated the St. George people were being encouraged to move to St. Paul. The plan entailed keeping the housing units on the two islands at a constant figure. Houses were being built on St. Paul but not on St. George. St. Georgians were being induced to move to St. Paul, and when they did, their homes were being demolished. Presumably, sooner or later all the homes would be removed on St. George.

Human Rights Commission Director Bowman questioned if his plan took into account a normal population increase. Baltzo replied in the negative.

"Our policy is to discourage people from coming back where there is already a labor surplus," Baltzo said.

Mrs. Susie Merculief, along with a number of other council members and residents, said the pressure went further than those described by Baltzo. She said that at a meeting at which Baltzo attended the council had been told the whole village had to move by 1975, that it was recorded in council minutes. She said they were told there would be no school—no jobs at St. George after that time.

"The next day after a family moves, they are in there tearing down the house they lived in although there are some of the homes that are crowded here," she said.

Rettie said that Udall did not know about the policy—that it was strictly a policy of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries—and indicated the secretary would not approve of it.

"We will not force anyone to move—that would not be American," he said. "No decision has been made and I am sure that we would not ask you to move unless we could offer you a better opportunity than you have now."

Baltzo, some members of the commission, and a number of Pribilofians including St. Paul President Merculief, said prior to 1950 the people were living in servitude.

This statement is diametrically opposed to a finding by an Interior Department Pribilof Commission in 1949 which stated: "Servitude may have existed previously but does not exist on the Pribilofs now." The recent testimony appears to substantiate a resolution passed in 1950 by the Alaska Native Brotherhood that the 1949 commission was a "white-wash."

"The period of time prior to 1950 is a sorry period in the history of the Pribilofs. Everyone admits that," Wade said in a statement released to only one newsman in Anchorage.

"The commission would like to lay to rest permanently the story of the residents of these islands are held in servitude and that the United States government is in any way restricting their lives, liberties and pursuit of happiness," the statement read.

Senator Bartlett on June 8 in intro- ducing a bill which would provide for reaching changes on the

Pribilofs said the bill was designed for reaching changes on the Pribilofs said the bill was designed to "allow the Pribilofians to stand on their own two feet and to obtain for them the protection and rights enjoyed by all Americans."

Secretary of State Wade himself at the public meeting at St. Paul said, "We hope one of the results of this commission's mission will be that the state government will become more conscious of its responsibilities and carry them out. I will be the first to admit that we haven't given you the attention we should have."

While the commission was on St. Paul Island, a five-member team from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers arrived to conduct a preliminary feasibility report of whether an existing channel on the island could be dredged and a small boat harbor could be built.

The engineers also studied whether scoria (a material formed from lava deposits) could be used in paving their airstrip.

The commission discussed with the people the possibilities of starting a small fishing industry. The Japanese fish the area extensively and the large number of glass balls (floats on Japanese fishing nets) found on Pribilofian beaches is proof of that.

Besides, the Pribilofians see the Japanese fishing vessels nearby and occasionally Japanese fishermen are brought to St. Paul Island for medical attention at the hospital there.

Christmas Eve last year hundred of Japanese ships rendezvoused in view of St. Paul. Their thousands of lights gave the appearance of a city sprung up over night.

The commission and the people discussed the possibilities of going into tourism — of establishing motel or hotel facilities on the island; of getting a loan to take over the processing of seal carcasses after the present five-year private contract runs out.

The commission talked with the people about buying the processed seal skins from the Fouke Fur Co. and making these into craft items for the tourist trade, in addition to ways of increasing employment and alleviating crowded housing conditions.

The statement issued by Wade in behalf of the commission denied reports that the residents of the islands were living in servitude. However, Wade said there were.

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four major areas of concern in which problems still exist.

These were listed as adequate housing, continued year around maintenance of St. George village, employment and the improvement of education, medical and social services.

In an earlier preliminary investigation, Willard Bowman, executive director of the State Human Rights Commission, reported there was not "servitude in the strict sense of the word" and also cited areas of improvement. Bowman reported that some Pribilovians said they were in servitude; others said they were not. The commission in its hearings did not question about it.

In introducing his bill regarding the Pribilofs, Senator Bartlett said, "All my life I have heard accounts of their problems. All my life I have heard too, the the official reassurances that Pribilovians are being well and fairly treated. And yet the problems continue."

The bill makes provision for the first time for Pribilovians to own

their own land and homes, to remove archaic regulations requiring passes to go and come from the island, gives Pribilovians full retirement seniority for the many years they have worked for the government, allows the Pribilovians to buy the very seal skins they help the U.S. government harvest and provides for the transfer of the schools from the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries to the State.

Other topics discussed were:

The forming of a townsite, the setting up of a municipal government, more employment sources (at present the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries is practically the only employer) — all directed at giving more independence to the Pribilovians.

Future issues of this paper will cover in detail the Pribilovians who have the use of luxurious homes but little security and independence.

The 4,574,000 Korean Conflict veterans who had no service in World War II averaged 32.9 years of age on June 30, 1964.