

## Pilots attend the Ferguson College of Technical Knowledge

When it came to the business of flying, Archie was as cold-blooded as a corpse on the polar ice pack. While he was always more than willing to steal any other pilot's passengers, he was not going to allow anyone -- and particularly Hans Mirow -- to steal his.

To keep a firm grip on his clientele, Archie and Hadley developed a system of codes that would let Archie know that a passenger was waiting in Shungnak or Deering even though Hadley might SAY on the radio the passenger was in Kiana. This baffled the competition. If Hans Mirow or another pilot was trying to snatch one of Archie's passengers, he would show up at the village where Hadley said there was passenger only to find that he had wasted time and aviation gas going to the wrong village.

When it came to operating the radio, Hadley

Ferguson was a professional. In the days of Morse Code, she learned to handle the key better than many white operators who had been speaking English their entire lives. Hadley was also an incredibly intelligent woman and an excellent business person. While Archie was essentially a schemer and conniver, Hadley was a knowledgeable, hard-core nuts-and-bolts person. She knew how to handle money and did well with it. Archie, on the other hand, didn't have a clue as to how to keep money once it found its way into his hands.

The only thing Archie spent money on willingly was his pilots. "Ferguson College of Technical Knowledge," he called his business laughingly. But he paid his pilots well remembered two of his pilots Ed Yost and Sam Shafsky. "We were the highest paid pilots in Alaska," Shafsky recalled.

When it came to having a good time, Archie's fun-loving side was infectious. Pilots loved to sit by the hour and listen to his wealth of stories -- most of them bare-faced lies. Then there were his practical jokes. Archie loved practical jokes! One time at Selawik, he was told that Hans Mirow would be flying over on his way to Nome. Archie hired some Eskimos to hurriedly dig a depression at the end of the runway. Then he taxied his Cessna Airmaster over and tipped its nose into the hole. Archie's plane was clearly identifiable from the air since the name FERGUSON was printed out in huge block letters across the top of the wing.

Mirow, flying very high as was his style, circled Selawik to get a better look at the aircraft that had apparently nosed into the landing strip. Then, as soon as Mirow turned back and headed for Nome, Archie righted his Airmaster and flew like the blazes, picking up some miners at Cleary Creek, and beat Mirow into Nome.

"Boy, was he surprised to see Archie in Nome!" Sam Shafsky laughingly said of Mirow.

By the end of the 1930's the Fergusons were among the wealthiest people in the Arctic, if not Alaska. They owned trading posts in five Arctic Communities. They had a sawmill, mink farm, and a greenhouse and owned the only movie theater north of the Arctic Circle. Additionally, they also owned and operated a hotel and restaurant and had interests in several gold operations as well as some jade claims.

But they were not the only entrepreneurs in the Arctic. In Kotzebue alone in the 1930s there were a handful of stores. In addition to Ferguson's there was Mrs Vernon's; Berryman's; Magids's run by the Magid brothers, Boris and Sam; Eckhardt's were miners and farmers for Archie in the 30's and 40's, had the store in the 60's; and Hanson's, an enterprise

had to offer. He started as a fur merchant in the 1920s and later expanded into the general store business. Oddly, he had worked for Tom Berryman early in his career, just as F.R. had.

But it was not just Louie Rotman and the Fergusons who were business and personal adversaries. It was everyone against



(Clara Salinas Photo)

Beulah "Bobble" Levy (left) and Pauline Schuerch

that Archie eventually won on an \$85 bet in 1948. Later Bess Cross, wife of Bush pilot John Cross, opened a store and restaurant. There were scores of other traders and fox and mink farmers in the area.

Then there was Archie's business nemesis and arch-enemy, Louis Rotman. Rotman, known as "Louie," as one of the sprinkling of Jewish merchants who had come north to take advantage of the opportunities the Arctic

everyone. After all, the entrepreneurs were all operating in a small town with only so much money to go around. If the Fergusons were not fighting with Bess Cross, then they were crossing swords with the Magid brothers. Sometimes it was a combination of the above and at others it was with the universally-hated federal government. But while he was alive, it was Louie Rotman that the Fergusons fought with the most.



Rotman was about the same size and age as Archie. Both men were equivalent when it came to their enthusiasm for "indoor sports." Louie eventually married Clara Levy, one of 4 daughters of a Jewish storekeeper in Kiana and an Eskimo woman -- but not before having a steamy affair with her sister, Beulah.

This particular liaison is significant because Beulah was to become Archie's long-term mistress from the mid-1940s to the end of her life in 1956. Beulah's son from Louie, Billy Levy died at the age of 20 in a plane crash 10 miles from Shishmaref in April of 1953. But while Billy was alive, Archie treated him as though he was his own son, which came as a surprise to many of the Kotzebue pilots since Louie and Archie hated each other with such a sizzling passion.

One of the many aspects of Native culture that did not change with the arrival of the white man in Alaska was the sexual proclivity of the Natives. Sexual intercourse was viewed as a natural function and performing it did not carry any of social or religious stigma of compunction which the Christian religion tried to inject. Sexual relations were open, frequent and unrestrained, a fact of life terribly distorted by Hollywood movies which insinuated that Eskimo men would "share their wives" with travelers. This was a grotesque over-simplification of what was actually occurring.

Sexual intercourse was widespread with some taboos but little regard to race or age spread between the participants. As a result, when family trees were drawn, their trunks and outstretched branches were so intertwined with so many other trees that the expression "one big happy family" had a real meaning north of the Arctic Circle.

While the Eskimos were doing publicly what many whites were doing privately, this did not mitigate the social stigma in the eyes of the whites. Eskimos were grossly discriminated against in

the same way as the blacks of the Deep South. They were often required to sit apart from whites in public gatherings and inter-racial marriages were looked upon as miscegenation. The Northwest (Kotzebue and Kiana) were more educated, more mixed marriages, less discrimination in early-mid 50's than 60's - 90's.

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( Southwest Museum Collection )

Jack Whaley ( far left ), Archie Ferguson ( 3rd from left), and Donald Mac Donald ( 3rd from right ) gather for breakfast.