

He's an artist, basket weaver, linguist. . .

by Barbara Crane
Tundra Times reporter

Alfred Stepetin could be excused for taking life easy now that chronic obstructive pulmonary disease has confined him to a wheelchair at Anchorage's Our Lady of Compassion Care Center.

However, even though his severely diminished lung capacity and constant need for oxygen restrict his physical activity, his mind and his hands are as busy as always.

Stepetin is an artist, basket weaver, linguist, teacher, historian and Russian Orthodox sub-deacon; and over the years his work has taken him to many communities throughout Alaska.

As his memories go back to all the places he's been in his 61 years, he captures those memories in watercolor paintings.

Many of his paintings are of wildflowers from around the state, and he has done village scenes which often include old Russian Orthodox churches.

Stepetin signs his paintings with the name "Agafangel" which is his Aleut name.

This year one of his flower paintings was selected for reproduction on the Our Lady of Compassion Care Center Christmas cards.

Stepetin, who was born in Unalaska, has happy memories of his early life.

"It was a very close-knit village of about 300 Native people, and we all led family-oriented lives," Stepetin recalled.

"I remember we had very strong village and Aleut traditional councils."

Stepetin's mother, Annie, spoke Aleut to him at home, but he didn't try to speak it himself until much later.

"I never spoke Aleut until I was about 25 and returned home after schooling," he said. "The people I knew were talking Aleut, so to be part of the conversation, I had to learn to talk it, too."

Stepetin and his family followed their traditional way of life until World War II began and fear of a Japanese invasion forced the evacuation of Unalaska.

Initially taken to Wrangell, they ended up at a little fishing camp on Burnett Inlet in Southeastern Alaska.

"It was bad," Stepetin said. "We were taken from our homes and set up in little wooden shacks and told to survive."

"We weren't asked if we wanted to go — we had to go."

Stepetin recalled they had to leave almost everything behind, taking only a suitcase of clothes with them.

"I was in my teens," he said, "so it didn't affect me as deeply as it did

the older people."

Traditional foods such as halibut, codfish and ducks were not available.

"We never starved, but we didn't have the foods we were used to," he said. "You can't live on Spam and a chunk of salt beef forever!"

Stepetin said the elders suffered emotionally, too, because their surroundings were so different from what they were used to.

"We never saw trees at home, and living among the trees we felt so isolated," he said. "We had open spaces in the Aleutians. The trees smothered us, and we felt we had no room to move around."

Stepetin hopes that eventually there will be compensation for the relocated Aleuts' losses, but he says it is impossible to set a figure on those losses.

"There's no way to compensate people for what they lost," he said.

"Not just the material things, but for mental, physical and emotional losses as well."

When the war ended the villagers were allowed to return home to Unalaska, but Stepetin stayed behind to finish school. He was a member of the last graduating class of Wrangell Institute in 1947.

Stepetin decided he wanted to become a Russian Orthodox priest, so he left Alaska to attend the Orthodox seminary in Pennsylvania.

"I left the seminary after two years because I wanted to come home again," he said. "Pennsylvania was too far away and I was alone."

After two years, he felt he had learned enough.

"I learned how to read Russian and to hold services," he said, "and that is what I wanted to do."

With this education, Stepetin became a sub-deacon in the Russian Orthodox Church.

"As a sub-deacon I help the bishop or replace a priest who is gone," he explained. "I can do anything except give the sacraments."

His church work has taken him to many villages, including Cordova, Tatitlek, Kodiak, Bethel, Akutan and the Pribilof Islands.

Stepetin held church services at Tyonek, an Athabascan village on Cook Inlet, for many years when Tyonek did not have its own priest, and he later stayed on to help the new priest.

"I lived in Tyonek on and off for about 20 years," Stepetin said.

"That's longer than I've lived among my own people, but they're so church oriented that I felt I was one of them."

He was in Sitka serving as secretary to the bishop when St. Michael's Cathedral burned down.

"That was an exciting night," he

recalled. "We looked up and saw the flames in the dome and scrambled to get everything out before the roof caved in."

Almost everything from the church's interior was saved, and the original plans were followed when the church was reconstructed.

Stepetin was in Sitka for the rededication of the new church.

"I walked up the street and saw the church standing there," he said. "It was amazing."

"I had seen it burn, but now it was back, identical to what it had looked like before."

"I opened the door and went inside and saw everything the same as I remembered. It was so beautiful that I cried."

Stepetin's life of service to the church and his knowledge of Aleut and Russian have made him uniquely qualified to undertake a translation project for the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

a lot of time and his eyes and fingers get sore when he does fine work.

He purchases raffia at an Anchorage hobby shop and then splits it down to a thread's thickness.

Stepetin is willing to share his basket weaving skill but says he would be careful about whom he would teach.

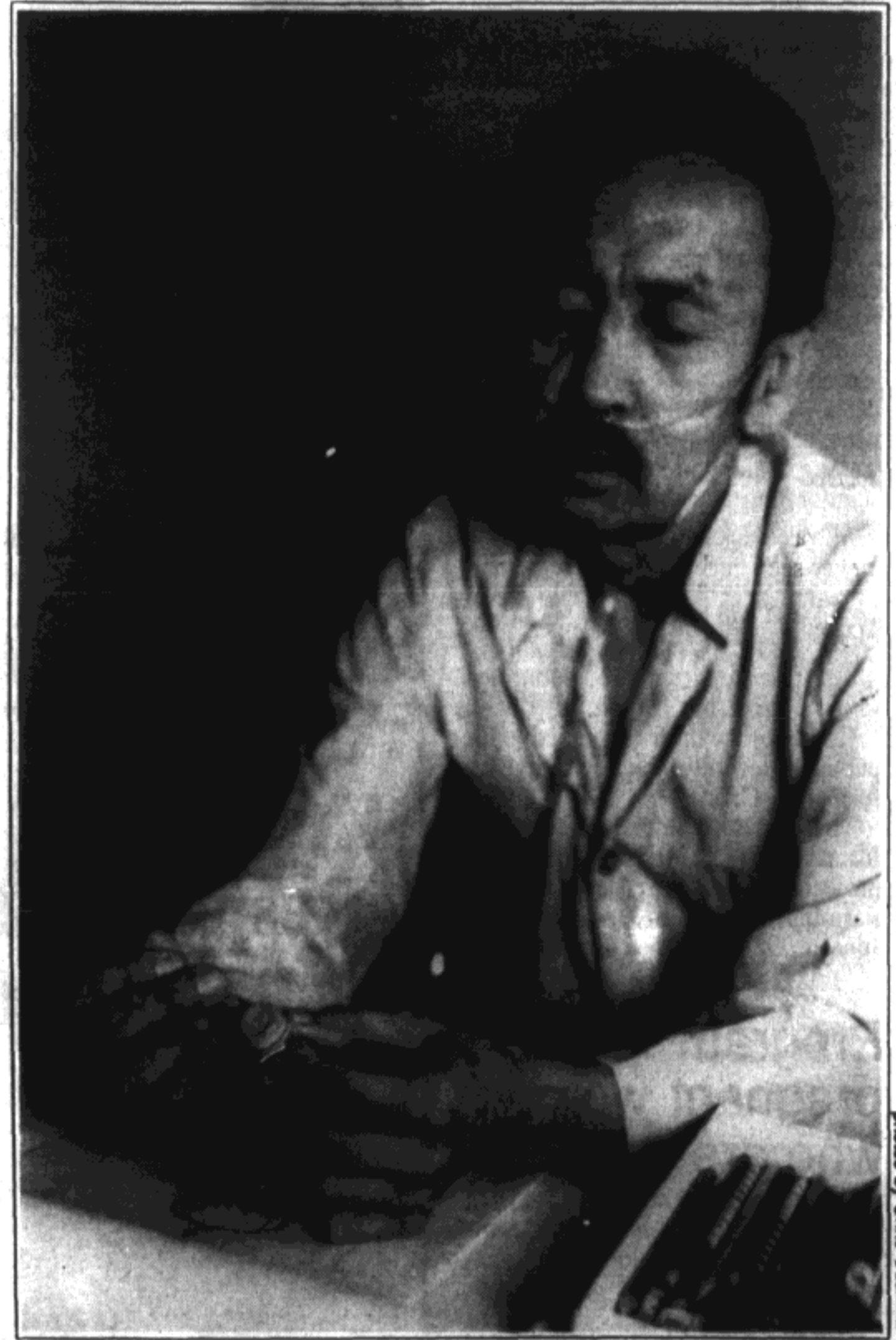
"Basket weaving is no longer done out of necessity," he said. "It is an art, and I don't want people to misuse it."

"If baskets are just cranked out for the tourists to buy, the quality goes way down. So we have to be very careful of who we teach or they won't be authentic Aleut anymore."

"I hate to see our culture and our traditions misused."

Stepetin has also worked to reacquaint young Aleuts with traditional Aleut dancing.

"My dad died when I was 6," he recalled, "but I remember seeing him dance. That memory laid back in my mind till I started dancing about 20



photos by Chris Chishman

If baskets are just "cranked out," the quality suffers, Alfred Stepetin says.

He is translating old manuscripts written by Russian priests. This is extremely complicated and time-consuming work as they are written in Aleut, but using the Russian Cyrillic alphabet.

The work is done in two steps: first he transliterates the Cyrillic letters to English letters, and then he translates the Aleut into English.

Though the work is tedious and goes slowly, Stepetin says he finds it very interesting.

Besides preserving the language, Stepetin works to keep other traditions of Aleut culture alive.

Ten years ago he learned the art of basket weaving from his aunt.

"I watched her weave," Stepetin said, "and then I wanted to learn how to do it, too."

Stepetin said that weaving isn't very hard to learn, but it is tedious. It takes

years ago."

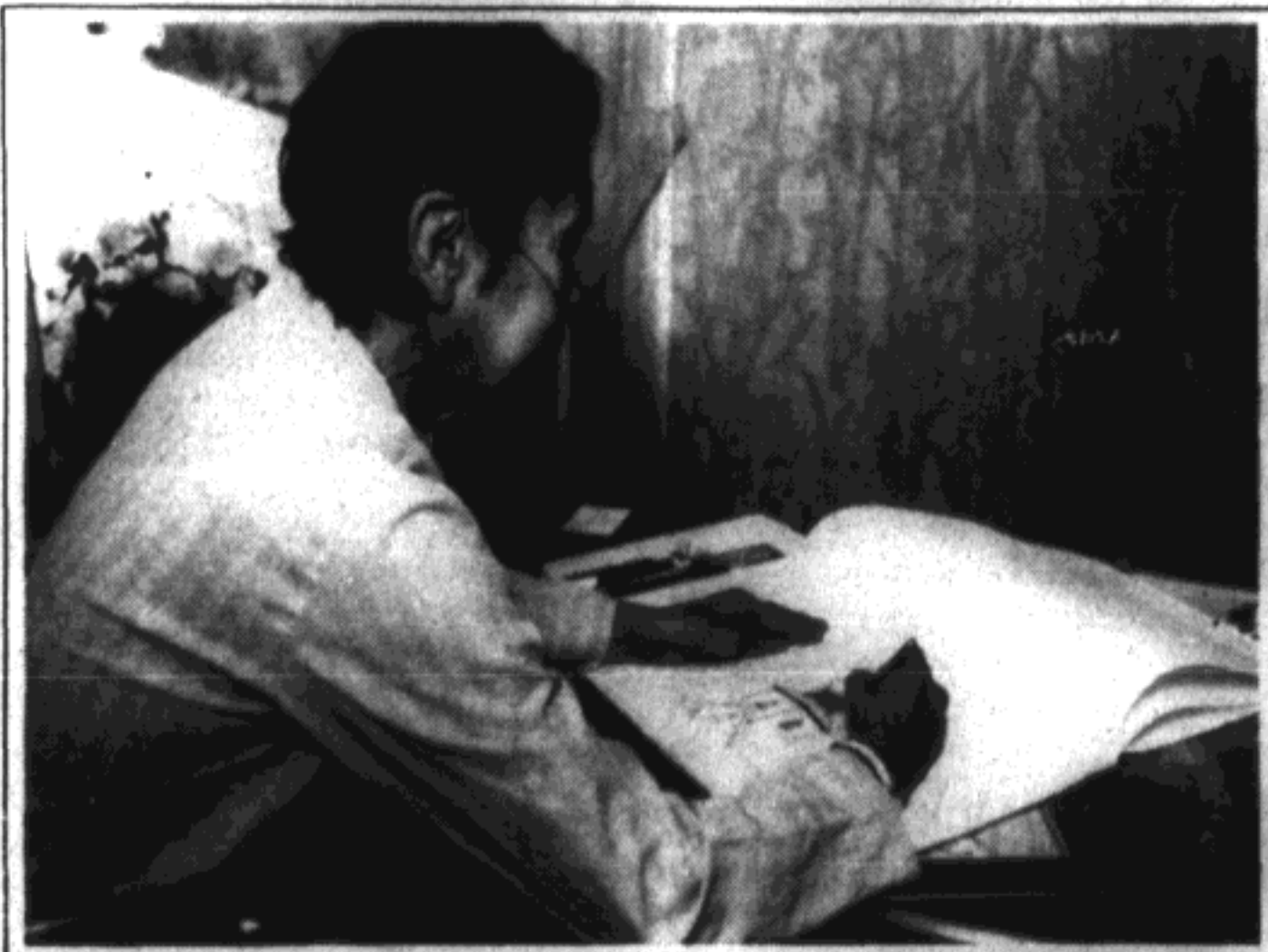
Stepetin explained that Aleut dancing is different from the more well-known Eskimo dancing. The dancer often also drums and sings his own song.

When a group of Unalaska high school students wanted to learn traditional dancing, they made a videotape of Stepetin and learned to dance by copying his moves.

"Like I always said, Aleut culture isn't dead, it's only been dormant," he said. "It will come back."

"Those young boys and girls I taught are now parents, and I hope they are teaching their children what they learned."

Though Stepetin's art, weaving and translation work keep him busy, he is eager to talk with his many old and new friends and invites them to come by the care center to visit.



Alfred Stepetin's work has taken him to communities throughout Alaska.