



Kristen Francis, 4, shares a joke with Santa earlier this month when he visited Arctic Village along with the Air Force.

Christmas brings together cultures

by Warren Jarvis
for the Tundra Times

*On the first day of Christmas,
My true love gave to me,
Daagoo k'aai tee dhidii*

ARCTIC VILLAGE — These words, sung by children, make a curious mixture of Christmas warmth, English and Athabaskan that somehow seem perfectly at home together. Two cultures living side-by-side, with the joy of children and Christmas bringing them closer together.

Last week, as in every December for the past 22 Christmases, the people of Arctic Village and the U.S. Air Force met for a few hours in the Arc-

tic twilight. In the four short hours between when Santa arrived aboard the big C-130 aircraft and the time he was forced by waning light to depart, a lot of good will was spread and a lot of fun shared.

Santa, also known as 1st Lt. Pete Manfrey, was welcomed with an enthusiastic crowd of small, bundled-up bodies when he stepped away from the Air Force transport. Some, old pros at welcoming Santa, pulled him down to their height for a serious face-to-face chat about all the subjects of Christmas: the reindeer, the elves, his workshop; and, of course, whether he had remembered to bring that special gift each had been yearning for.

Others, a little less sure of this strange rosy-cheeked man hidden behind the bright red suit and flowing white beard, hovered in the group and simply listened, their disappearing uncertainty reflected in glowing, growing smiles shining in their eyes.

From the plane Santa was whisked off to the village by dogsled. The children following as fast as they could get their parents to follow.

Once in the village high school gym, presents gathered under the tree and eager children straining at the loose semi-circle in which they were arranged, Santa began calling out

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names. The price of a present was a hug; the profit a happy child.

For the village as a whole, Santa brought a new washer and dryer and a variety of different foods.

After all presents had been delivered and another quick dogsled ride taken, Santa settled in to listen as a small group of children sang verses from nine Christmas carols, some of them in their Native language.

Not only Christmas carols were sung, however, and Christmas was not the only event celebrated at the school that day. The whole room joined in a chorus of "Happy Birthday" for Adrian Tritt, just turning 1 year old. Sharing the occasion were his grandparents, Peter and Sarah Tritt, who also have birthdays in December.

Finally, after all had eaten their fill from the large, crowded table set by the village, Santa had to leave. Behind him, in a village of another culture, he left behind that which is present in all places, with all people — the pampering, playful love of a grandfather for his 1-year-old grandson, the shrill joy in children's voices and the serious wonder in the eyes of the very young — the love between people that makes Christmas what it is.

According to an Air Force spokesman, more than \$3,000 was raised for the annual Air Force trip to Arctic Village. The money was raised, from such events as bake sales, t-shirt sales, a Halloween auction and contributions raised by the Officer's Wives Club.

About 10 to 20 percent of what the squadron raises every year goes towards the Arctic Village trip. The choice of presents brought depends on a list provided by the village.

The yearly trip began, Air Force officials said, when a large forest fire in the late 1960s forced the porcupine caribou herd to alter its traditional migratory route. The herd is the prime food source of the village, which still relies upon subsistence for a large amount of its food.

In response to the village's request for help, the Air Force flew village hunters to the herd, and back to the village with the meat. After the herd resumed its normal route, the Air Force assistance changed into an annual visit from Santa.

Arctic Village is a small Athabaskan community of about 125 people, roughly 200 miles north of Fairbanks and 120 miles above the Arctic Circle. Villagers refused all monetary and other benefits under the 1971 Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act to gain full title to 1.6 million acres of land they share with Venetie Indian Village, about 90 miles to the southwest of them.

photos by Barbara Crane



Santa gets mobbed by kids at the Arctic Village airport, top photo. Center left, Trisha Gilbert enjoys a candy cane during Santa's visit. Center right, Tisheena Frank, 3, poses for a photo. At bottom, Adrien Tritt, who turned 1 on the day of Santa's visit Dec. 12, shows two different moods. He's calm when he's in the arms of his father, Steven Tritt, but not Santa.