

The Ferguson brothers marry



Col. A. Goebel, Dr. A.M. Goulder, Marcellus Murdock join Archie Ferguson, Donald McDonald (3-r) and well-known aviator Jack Jefford at the Ferguson cafe. McDonald, an Alaska Airlines pilot died in a crash. (Southwest Museum Collection)

During the summer, when the snow melts, the Arctic soil turns into a sponge. As the temperature rises, pools of water unfreeze and grow in size. Billions of insects appear from their winter hibernation filling the ponds with their larvae. As the larvae mature, they cover the short grasses of the tundra until the plants are black with insects. In turn, this fecundity of insects brings millions of birds from around the world who feed on this bountiful harvest.

Tundra, the generic term for plant growth in the Arctic, rarely reaches chest-high. These are patches of plants in some parts of the Arctic which can get to mid-shin but for the most part are ankle high and the greenery grows in what would be called a swamp anywhere else in the United States.

With regard to the animals, wolves do live in the Arctic and will sometimes travel in packs. But these groupings average six to eight animals, not several hundred. Caribou are a major food source for the wolves when they migrate through the wolves' hunting ranges, but, for the bulk of the year, wolves survive on lemming, ptarmigan, Arctic hare and whatever else they can catch. Wolves eat what they kill; they don't leave scores of carcasses littering the landscape.

Polar bears do prowl through the most northern fringes of Alaska, but rarely do they get as far south as the Arctic Circle. Polar bear and wolf attacks are extremely rare.

Another myth of the northland is that Eskimos live in ice-and-snow igloos. Alaska's Eskimo do not and probably never have lived in these structures using them for temporary shelter. Throughout antiquity, they have built their homes of whale bone, driftwood and sod.

But the greatest mistake many people make is in assuming that Alaska is the Arctic. While the Arctic is part of Alaska, it is by no means all of the state. Tech-

nically, the Arctic is that area which lies north of the Arctic Circle, that latitude on which the sun does not set on the summer solstice (June 21) and does not rise on the winter solstice (Dec. 21). Geographically, it is 66 degrees, 33 minutes North and varies slightly from year to year.

In terms of miles, consider that the distance from Los Angeles to Seattle is roughly 1,000 miles, about the same as from Boston to Atlanta or Houston to Denver. From Seattle to Anchorage, the most populous city in Alaska, the distance is another 1,500 miles. From Anchorage to Kotzebue, 35 miles north of the Arctic Circle, there are another 550 miles. Though there are sections of the Arctic Circle which are closer to Anchorage, the area most people associate with the far, far North is still substantially distant from the heavily-populated areas of the state. Finally, the geographic North Pole, which many people seem to believe is "just on the other side of the Arctic Circle," is actually 1500 miles north of Kotzebue.

Why the Fergusons headed North is a matter of some dispute. A few sources state they were trying to avoid the impending World War I draft. By moving North, their children would be out of harm's way. This version may have sprung more from Archie's tall tales than any truth. Legendary Bush pilot John Cross of Kotzebue noted while it may have been true that the Fergusons came north to avoid the draft, neither of the Ferguson boys would have been taken as they were both "small for their age, just over the line" and may very well have flunked the draft physical. Further, even if the Ferguson boys had been in the Territory of Alaska, they would still have been eligible for service.

This may be part of the legend of Archie. Fred Goodwin, who came to Alaska in 1939 and worked for the Episcopal Missions in Nenana driving dog teams and hauling wood before flying,

remembers Archie had indeed been ordered to report for induction. As he recalls, Archie and Warren were sent a telegram ordering them to report to Nome. The two brothers were 300 miles west of Nome at the time and started walking. "By the time we got to Nome," Archie told Goodwin, "the War was over. 'Course we didn't walk very fast.'"

While his parents scrounged a living in Nome, Archie, in his twenties, worked at a sawmill and operated the water nozzle at a gold operation.

Looking further east, F.R. saw an opportunity which he could not pass up. Tom Berryman, who ran a string of trading posts across the Arctic was looking for a responsible manager for his post in Shungnak, a community of no more than 100 on the Kobuk River. F.R. took the job and became Berryman's employee at the Shungnak branch of the Kotzebue Fur Trading Company.

After F.R. acquired another nest egg, he bought out Johnny Cleveland's store at Kobuk. The Ferguson's oldest son, Warren, ran the second family store at Koutchak Creek, halfway between Shungnak and Kobuk.

The next Ferguson store, which Archie ran, was in Selawik. Translated from Inupiat, Selawik, meaning "place where the female shee fish spawns," was an ideal spot for a store. It was a hub

community attracting patrons from far up the Selawik River. Three rivers fed into nearby Selawik Lake, making it an excellent place to fish, as the community's name clearly implied. Selawik was also known as the "Venice of the Arctic" because of the streams that flow through the community.

By this time, the family has separated. Warren was in Kotzebue running the new Ferguson store where while Archie remained at the Ferguson store in Selawik. Both brothers had married Eskimo women in the Friends Church in Selawik. In Jan. of 1919, Archie married Hadley (Vayluk) Wood, a granddaughter of the Chief of the Kobuk Eskimos. (Warren later married Minnie Gallaborn in 1931.)

(Excerpted from the book "Archie Ferguson, The King of Kotzebue," by Steven C. Levi. 1992 by Steven C. Levi and E.I.A. Publishing Co., Anchorage. Materials from this book cannot be used without express written consent from the author and publisher.)